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Becoming Stardolls: Untangling  
Postfeminist and Romantic  
Childhood (re)Positionings in Tween  
Girlhood

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## Declaration

I declare that the contents of this thesis are my own work and that no material contained in this thesis has been submitted for a degree at another university.

The papers listed here have been presented during my time studying for this PhD:

Gutteridge, I. (2011) 'Bedroom Culture Goes Online' presented at 'Japan and South Korea annual PhD student conference', Seoul University, South Korea.

Gutteridge, I. (2012) 'The Internet as a transformative girl space?' presented at 'Digital girlhood conference', London School Economics.

Gutteridge, I. (2013) 'The Ugly Side of Stardoll' presented at 'Women and Gender Studies Graduate Seminar Series', University of Warwick

Gutteridge, I. (2013) 'Managing tween spaces online', invited speaker at the University of Sheffield.

Gutteridge, I. (2014) 'Stardoll a safe haven? (De)constructing tween spaces online' presented at British Sociological Association Annual Conference, University of Leeds.

## Summary

This thesis analyses the construction and negotiation of ‘the tween’ and tween cultural spaces online, forming part of an emerging field of digital girlhood studies. The research is situated in two online ‘tween’ spaces: *Stardoll*, a commercial website, and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, a blog run by members of *Stardoll*. Combining a ‘cultural analysis’ approach with ethnographic traditions such as ‘immersion’ and ‘mapping’, this thesis interrogates articulations of tween culture through interlinking online case studies. The key findings of this thesis are centred on three themes. First, the construction of an explicitly tween culture on *Stardoll* that situates the site within a commodified pinkification of girl culture. Second, the governance of boundaries of tween girlhood, examined through two features of the site. (1) I argue that the production of Cyrus as a tween celebrity, by *Stardoll* and the girls’ who consume her, are moderated within a ‘tween speech’ genre; and (2) interrogating discourses of risk I argue that the boundaries of *Stardoll’s* tween culture are governed by understandings of risk within the site and from the girls’ blog *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The third theme is the articulation of tween femininity; I argue that *Stardoll* produces a neoliberal, postfeminist tween identity on the site. Interestingly, the girls who use *Stardoll* (re)position other, younger girls within Romantic discourses of childhood in their governance of tween girlhood. However both *Stardoll* and the girls are invested in similar constructions of tween girlhood based on ‘wholesomeness’ and framed by understandings of age, through complex discourses of postfeminism and Romantic childhood.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Situating this research around *Stardoll*, a popular commercial tween website, this project examines the constitution of ‘the tween’ and tween culture within new media websites online.

There are three central themes to this project; the signification of tween culture, the articulation and negotiation of tween subjectivity and the creation, maintenance and governance of the boundaries of tween culture. In order to examine these themes I have situated this research in three interlinking case studies. I explore two different, linked ‘tween’ websites: first the commercial site, *Stardoll*, which forms the main case study for this research. *Stardoll* is a website centred around the interests of ‘fame, fashion and friends’, and which proclaims itself to be the ‘world’s largest online fashion and dress up games community for girls!’ (2014). A screen shot of *Stardoll*’s homepage is shown in Figure 1.1 below. Originally set up in 2004 as a paperdoll site, *Stardoll* has grown into a complex commercial tween website that has over 3 million members worldwide (2014), and retains a focus on dress up play. A screen shot of the *Stardoll* avatar is shown in Figure 1.2 below, which is a customisable dress up doll.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

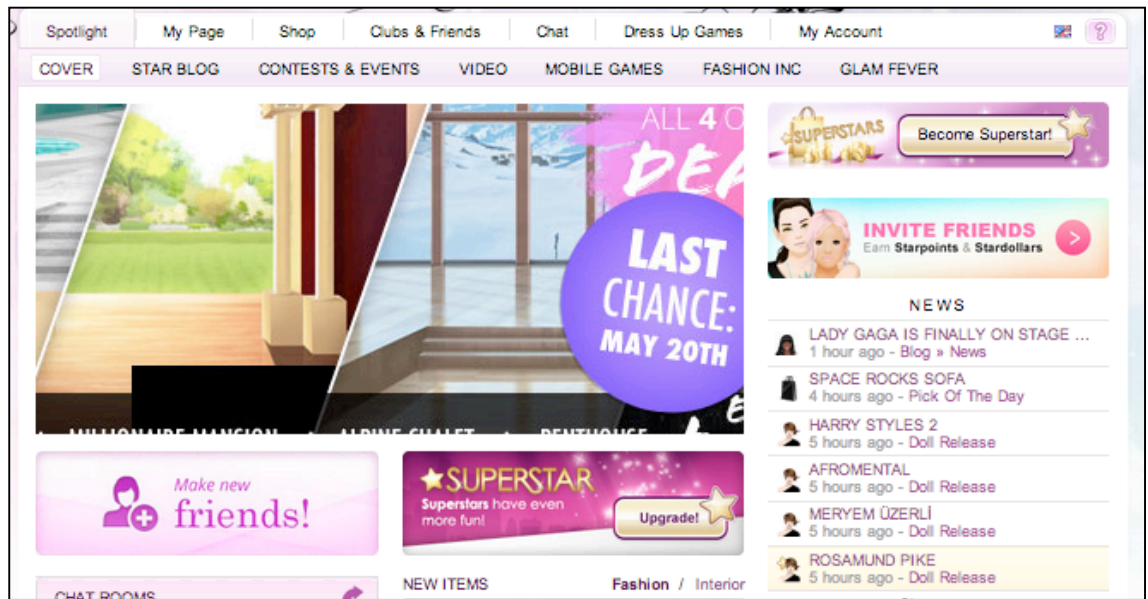


Figure 1-1 Screen shot of Stardoll's homepage



Figure 1-2 Screen shot of Stardoll avatar

The second website analysed in this thesis is *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, a blog produced by a number of *Stardoll* members and hosted on [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com). The blog

was established by a number of *Stardoll* users because of their experiences on the site. The blog is a distinctly different 'tween' space online as it is set up and run by tween girls who use *Stardoll*. A screen shot of the homepage of *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is shown in Figure 1.3 below.



Figure 1-3 Screen shot from The Ugly Side of Stardoll homepage

Finally, to examine the articulation of tween celebrity on *Stardoll* I focus on tween celebrity Miley Cyrus as a further case study within the main site for data analysis. Cyrus was chosen because of the shift in her celebrity trajectory, moving from tween to adult during the period of research; her location as a focal point within a broader tween culture and the prominent position of her; and her tween television show, in which she stars as Hannah Montana on *Stardoll*.

Defining the tween has been the subject of considerable academic discussion. As such there are a number of competing definitions, comprising those rooted in biological understandings of age or sexual development (Hermann-Giddens et al. 1997), social positioning (Coulter, 2005) or defined by participation in a particular

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form of popular culture (Driscoll, 2005). However, broadly the tween can be defined as a young femininity situated within a consumer culture (Harris, 2005). Within a postfeminist, neoliberal context tween girlhood has been the focus of both opportunities and anxieties, where on the one hand girls are celebrated as successful and on the other they are framed within discourses of risk (Harris, 2004).

Tweens have been at the centre of contemporary gendered anxieties over childhood articulated by media commentary and political discourse, specifically the sexualisation of girls, and the commercialisation and the technologisation of childhood. Furthermore, these concerns have often been intensified in online spaces where girls are simultaneously positioned as digital natives and 'at risk'. The rhetoric of contemporary girlhood as 'in crisis' has been bolstered by a number of policy reviews, notably The Sexualisation of Young People Review (Papadoplous, 2010) and Letting Children be Children (Bailey, 2011). Through the interlinking case studies outlined above this project draws together emerging research in the field of digital girlhood studies and explores how tween girlhood is produced and negotiated in online spaces.

### Overview of academic context

The thesis is situated at the nexus of a number of fields, primarily girlhood studies, digital childhoods and work on celebrity and fandom. The commercial website *Stardoll*, which is the central focus of my research, alongside *The Ugly Side of*

*Stardoll*, draw these arenas together to enable a multi field approach to the study of tween girlhood.

### Digital girlhood studies and tween culture

This project contributes to the established field of girlhood studies and growing interest in tween culture. In this thesis I draw on a wealth of research from the field of girlhood studies that has examined girls' cultures looking at, in particular, work done on girls' magazines and girls' fandom practices and reframing this within online spaces. Discussions of tween culture have often focus on issues of defining 'the tween' from biological (Hermann-Giddens et al. 1997), based in consumed culture, (Lindstrom, 2004), social (Coulter, 2005) and cultural (Driscoll, 2005) definitions as well as analysis of tween culture (Harris, 2005 and Brookes and Kelly, 2009). However, there has been little work examining the construction of tween culture and the articulation of tween femininity in online spaces. This thesis contributes to this notable gap through the interrogation of *Stardoll's* tween positioning.

Research within digital girlhood studies has tended to focus on gender differentiation in online activities, and indicates that girls spend time online communicating with friends and consuming celebrity culture (Cassell and Cramer, 2008; BECTA, 2008; Barker, 2011). Within the emerging field of digital girlhood studies girls' digital cultures have been conceptualised as 'virtual bedroom cultures' (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; and Barker, 2011). Some research has examined how spaces online are aged and gendered (Willett, 2005; Reid – Mitchell, 2007;



Willet, 2009) forming a 'reading path' moving through childhood, tweendom and adolescence.

### Digital childhoods

Childhood studies emerged as a distinctive field in the 1990s and was termed the 'New Childhood Studies'. The argument that childhoods as socially constructed gained prominence and became the central featured of the new childhood studies (James, Jenks and Prout, 1990). Due to the increasing prominence of digital media and the development of new media ecologies, research within childhood studies has begun to examine digital childhoods. Research within digital childhood studies has focused on quantifying children's activities online and examining how this intersects with their offline lives. However as argued by Weber and Dixon (2007) there has been a lack of analysis exploring girls' spaces online, a gap that this project contributes to.

There are three key discourses constructing children online: first anxieties over the technologisation of childhood; second the discursive construction of children as 'at risk' online; and third the positioning of children as digital natives. These frameworks conflictly locate children within discourses of concern and opportunity online. Risk understanding and children's exposure to online risks has been a significant feature of digital childhood studies. Research on children's risk has tended to focus on what categories of risk children face and how this is gendered (Haddon and Livingstone, 2008; Pedersen, 2013; boyd, 2014). Whilst there has been research gauging the levels and categories of risk children are exposed to online there has been little qualitative research examining children's

situated perceptions and their strategies for the management of risk in online spaces.

### Celebrity and fandom

Celebrity culture is central to the formation of tween culture on *Stardoll* and is significant for identity, play and knowledge on the site. Celebrity and fandom literature has been a growing area of research since Braudy's argument that 'we live in a society bound together by the talk of fame' (1986: 1). Since then the emerging field of celebrity studies has been interested in the function of celebrity speech. The significance of celebrities as sites through which broader cultural meaning and values can be explored has been discussed notably by Turner (2004), Holmes and Redmond (2006) and Marshall (1997). Amongst others Turner (2004) explores the social and cultural functions of celebrity and gossip cultures as a way to examine social values and morality. However, despite their position within discourses of concern and growing financial power tween celebrities have not been subject to much academic exploration. Alongside the academic analysis of celebrity culture interest in fandom has grown from McRobbie and Garber's (1975) study on the teenybopper phenomena. Recently the functions of fandom for girls have been central research interests (see for examples Lowe, 2003; Murray, 2007; Wolf, 2007). The growth of new media sites has presented new opportunities for digital fandom (Jenkins, 2006), presenting new locations for fan research.

Within these fields analysis of the construction of tween culture on commercial websites, the articulation of tween girlhood in these spaces and significantly how girls use and negotiate these sites has not been undertaken. Furthermore analysing

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on the role of celebrity culture and function of celebrity consumption within digital tween girlhoods has been notably absent from academic discussion. This project draws together a number of growing areas of research, tween girlhood, digital childhoods and online production and consumption of celebrity culture. In bringing these fields together this project contributes to a number of gaps in these literatures and presents a multi field approach to their examination.

### Research questions

This thesis is structured around four sets of research questions:

1. How is tween girlhood constructed and signified in online spaces? What articulations of tween femininity are uttered in this space?
2. How are competing discourses of tween celebrity produced on *Stardoll*? In what ways does this constitute different articulations of 'tween speech'?
3. In what ways is tween identity negotiated through discourses of online risk? How are the boundaries of tween culture governed by the site and by the girls?
4. How are girls positioned as social actors by discourses of girlhood on *Stardoll*? In what ways do they reposition themselves?

### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis draws on work examining the convergence of postfeminism and neoliberalism in exploring contemporary

girlhood. This is complemented with theories of childhood, in particular, Romantic discourses of childhood, in order to contextualise the 'tween' positioning of girls on *Stardoll*.

Throughout this thesis I draw on a postfeminist and neoliberal framework within theoretical considerations of contemporary girlhood. The importance of youth within postfeminism locates girls centrally in the articulation of postfeminist discourses (Projansky, 2007). Furthermore, the application of postfeminism to this project is reinforced by the location of women's empowerment and demonstrations of their individuality in consumer culture (Tasker and Negra, 2007; Fairclough, 2008). As Tasker and Negra argue 'postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self' (2007: 2).

Gill and Scharff (2011), McRobbie (2009) and Koffman and Gill (2013) have argued that postfeminist and neoliberal subjectivities converge. Gill and Scharff (2011) identify three aspects of this convergence: first the privileging of a form of individualism based on discourses of choice; second both postfeminist and neoliberal subjectivities have significant similarities based on class; and third that women (or girls) are ideal neoliberal subjects. This postfeminist and neoliberal landscape is evidenced in discourses of Girl Power that shape contemporary understandings of girlhood. Taft (2004) argues that this articulation of girlhood positions girls as postfeminist and antifeminist, and is based on discourses of choice and empowerment where the power afforded to girls is consumer based.

The second aspect of the theoretical framework of this thesis is theoretical considerations of childhood. The Romantic period has been seen as the basis for modern conceptions of childhood (Clarke, 2004; Cunningham, 2006; Richardson, 2008), and both Rousseau's (1969) and Locke's (1989) views on children are significant voices in the development of this discourse of childhood. Through the Romantic period these ideas of children gained traction and childhood became considered as a period distinct from adulthood, as rooted in nature and framed the child as 'becoming'. Significantly Rousseau's argument for children's original innocence became central to Romantic articulations of childhood. Meyer (2008) argues that the Romantic discourse of childhood frames articulations of contemporary children as vulnerable and virtuous on the one hand and ignorant and weak on the other. Recently childhood has been seen as in crisis and even been discussed as a 'death of childhood' (see for example, Postman, 1994; Palmer, 2006; Elkind, 2007) and these anxieties are formed through concerns that a Romantic discourse of childhood is disappearing.

By drawing a postfeminist and neoliberal framework of girlhood together with theorising of Romantic discourses of childhood, this project examines the articulation of tween girlhood and the positioning of tweens within this complex landscape.

### Methodological approach

The research design of this project combined a cultural analysis of *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* with ethnographic traditions such as 'immersion' and 'mapping'. In drawing on a combination of cultural analysis and ethnographic techniques an in depth qualitative analysis of each of the websites was undertaken. The research design was divided into two overlapping stages: first a period of immersion on the websites, and second systematic data collection focused on particular aspects, areas or features of the sites. These focused areas of the websites became case studies to examine two themes, the production of tween celebrity and discourses of risk online. Dividing the data collection into two stages meant that I could qualitatively analyse these spaces despite the complexity of websites, which was a particular challenge researching *Stardoll*, as a large and ever changing site, over the period of the research. The combination of approaches enabled an overview of the websites and in addition contextualises the more in depth discursive analysis of particular features or areas of the sites.

The analytic approach to this project combined established media studies techniques and specific analytic tools such as notions of capital and speech genre. The approach to discourse analysis is guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) discussion of thematic discourse analysis where researchers identify a number of themes and patterns within their data sets. This approach was particularly useful to use in the exploration of websites as it enabled the identification of discursive themes throughout and between the two complex spaces. Moreover, this process of discourse analysis produced an analytic map of the websites and allowed

changes over time to be traced. Furthermore, using another established media studies approach, semiotic analysis, as discussed by Rose (2012) and Koller (2008) complemented the analytic techniques drawn on in this project. Semiotics has a history of use in the field of celebrity studies and the study of advertising, two themes that are explored in this thesis. Although the application of semiotics to website based research is only beginning to emerge, the combination of discourse and semiotic analysis offers a rich analytic framework for this project as websites are visual forms of media.

Alongside established media studies techniques I use on a number of analytic tools in order to examine different aspects of the websites. I draw on Bakhtin's (1970) notion of speech genre to examine distinct articulations of speech on *Stardoll*. Bakhtin's argument that 'each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types (of utterances)... these we may call speech genres' (2010: 60) enables a deconstruction of the linguistic genres of *Stardoll*. Complementing my use of Bakhtin I draw on Foucauldian notions of discursive power in my analysis. Combining these approaches to language I examine how the constructions of speech genre are the product of power, as Foucault argues 'discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them, and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (1977: 49). In addition I have drawn on notions of moral capital, as discussed by Valverde (2005) in analysing the girls' discursive command of tween celebrity and social capital, as examined by (Drenteam and Moren – Cross, 2005; Pfeil, Arjan and Zaphiris, 2009) in the analysis of the operation of *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The analytical approach to the data

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enabled a discursive and semiotic analysis of the websites in addition to getting purchase on the interactive elements that are central to the websites examined in this thesis.

A situational based approach to ethics informed this research which takes into consideration issues of anonymity in online spaces, the distinction between public and private spaces and consent. Additionally the ethical approach to this project drew from ethical discussions of researching with children, and the importance of children's voices in childhood research.

### Thesis Outline

#### Chapter 2: Childhood, Girlhood and Tween Culture

In this chapter I present an overview of three overlapping fields of literature that this thesis is situated in and that form the framework for analysis: childhood, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of contemporary girlhood and tween culture. The first part explores the development of contemporary Romantic based notions of childhood and traces concerns for the death or crisis of childhood. The second part focuses on contemporary girlhood as it outlines the convergence of postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks and discusses the significant place of girls within this. I go on to examine how girls are positioned as part of Girl Power discourses and as at risk. Drawing these two sections together I outline the sexualisation of girls and the commercialisation of childhood as focal points for concern. In the third part of this chapter I give an overview of research exploring



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tween girlhood discussing competing definitions of tween identity and tween culture.

## Chapter 3: Digital Childhoods and Digital Girlhoods

In Chapter 3 I discuss the emerging research on digital childhoods and digital girlhoods. I examine three discourses of children online: the technologisation of childhood, children as 'at risk' online and digital natives. I then focus on gendered behaviour and the 'digitalisation' of girlhood in online spaces. I review the developing research on children's commercial and tween spaces online as they contextualise the two websites for this research.

## Chapter 4: Introduction to Case Studies: *Stardoll*, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* and Miley Cyrus

In Chapter 4 I introduce the framework of case studies used in this thesis and give an overview of fandom literature. I draw on three interlinking case studies; the website *Stardoll*, the blog *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* and tween celebrity Miley Cyrus. The research was predominantly situated on *Stardoll* and in this chapter I map the site. I go on to describe *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* a blog set up and run by a number of *Stardoll* users. Finally I give an overview and justification for my use of Miley Cyrus, the celebrity case study for this thesis. As part of this discussion I contextualise the celebrity and fandom case study with a brief overview of work examining girls' fandom and emerging work on digital fandoms.

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## Chapter 5: Methodology

In this chapter I outline my methodological approach, where I combined a cultural studies approach including semiotic and discourse analysis with ethnographic traditions, specifically 'immersion' and 'mapping'. I discuss the two stages of research moving from an immersive state to more systematic data collection. I go on to explore some of the challenges facing website research; the complex and fluid nature of these spaces and the use of web archives. I discuss my approach to these challenges. Finally I discuss ethical considerations drawing together emerging ethical considerations with online research and established ethical concerns researching children's cultures.

## Chapter 6: (De) Constructing Stardolls: Interrogating the Construction of Tween Culture and Discourses of Tween Girlhood on *Stardoll*

In this chapter I draw on my analysis and observations of *Stardoll*. The chapter had two functions, first to explore the construction of *Stardoll* as an explicitly tween space, and second to interrogate the discourses of tween girlhood, articulated through consumer culture, celebrity culture and education/ careers. I focus on how discourses of young femininity position girls as neoliberal and postfeminist.

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### Chapter 7: Commanding Representations of Cyrus: Counter Discursive Modes of Speech on *Stardoll's Starblog*

In this chapter I focus my discussion on one aspect of *Stardoll*, the celebrity gossip blog, the *Starblog* to examine the production of tween celebrity. I analyse the Miley Cyrus articles and comment spaces. First the chapter examines how the *Starblog* commands representations of Cyrus to render her tween appropriate for the tween speech genre of the site through the control of her sexuality. Second I examine how the girls' articulations of Cyrus' celebrity are commanded by discourses of concern and morality centred on discussions of her sexuality.

### Chapter 8: *Stardoll's* 'Safe haven': Negotiating Risk Understanding, Management and Responsibility

In the third analytical chapter I analyse competing discourses of risk on *Stardoll* and the girls' blog *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. In the first part of this chapter I examine a range of safety advice presented on *Stardoll* and directed towards the girls who use the site and their parents. In the second part I analyse the girls' blog and explore their alternative discourses of risk understanding, responsibility and management.

### Chapter 9: Conclusions

The final chapter draws together the thesis by outlining the main findings of the study and the contribution to knowledge.

## **Chapter 2. Childhood, Girlhood and Tween Culture**

### **2.1.Introduction**

The contextualising literature for this thesis is broadly situated in three fields; childhood/ girlhood, children's digital cultures and celebrity/ fandom. This chapter outlines the relevant aspects of childhood and girlhood studies and situates the theoretical framework used in this thesis. The following literature chapter takes this framework and explores how the Internet has reconstituted features of childhood and girlhood. Finally I give an overview of fandom studies in Chapter 4, alongside introducing the three interlinking case studies of the thesis. As my thesis sits at the nexus of these fields there are significant overlaps between the topics covered in each chapter and these links are pointed out throughout the discussion. Therefore the chapter headings indicate the overarching focus of the chapter.

This chapter is divided into three broad sections that have areas of overlap; childhood, girlhood and tween culture. In the first section I give a brief overview of the historical development of contemporary understandings of childhood. I have given particular focus to the development of the Romantic child as central to modern understandings of childhood and used within the theoretical framework of this thesis. I then outline concerns for the 'death of childhood' looking at key commentators, discussing how these anxieties arise from the perception that Romantic discourses of childhood have been transgressed.

## Chapter 2 - Childhood, Girlhood and Tween Culture

In the second section of this chapter I discuss discourses of contemporary girlhood, drawing on the field of girlhood studies and discussed a number of key policy reviews. I examine the interplay between postfeminism and neoliberalism focusing on two aspects, consumerism and youthfulness, as they have particular significance for this work. The convergence of postfeminism and neoliberalism within the articulation of 'Girl Power' discourses form the theoretical framework for this thesis. After outlining key discourses that frame girlhood I present an overview of two interlinking moral anxieties, the sexualisation of girls and the commercialisation of childhood both of which contextualise the milieu of this research. I discuss how values of a Romantic idea of childhood are embedded within these discourses and how tweens and tween culture became a significant site for concerns.

In the final section of this chapter I have focused on tween culture as the specific cultural location for this thesis. I consider different ways of defining 'tweens', looking at claims from biological, social /political and cultural perspectives. I propose that taking a cultural perspective to the definition of the tween fits with girlhood consumption practices. I go on to examine an emerging body of work within girlhood studies analysing tween culture. I discuss how tween culture is marketed to young girls through biological assumptions of tweens' life stage as 'in between' childhood and adolescence. Finally I outline the significance of consumerism to tween culture and to the production of tween identity.

## **2.2.Theoretical framework: Romantic discourses of childhood**

This thesis is broadly situated within the field of childhood studies. In this section I give an overview of childhood studies before focussing on the trajectory of girlhood studies in the following section. A distinct field of childhood studies can be said to have emerged towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. James, Jenks and Prout's (1990) seminal text is often taken as central to the establishment of the discipline, often termed the 'New Childhood Studies'. In setting out the key features of the paradigm of childhood studies they argued that 'childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural or a universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies' (1990: 8). Prior to the emergence of the 'New Childhood Studies' as a field, research on childhood was undertaken within a number of disparate disciplines. At the nexus of these disciplinary understandings of childhood there was a tension between biological and social frameworks of childhood (Jenks, 2005 and Thorne, 2007). The 'New Childhood Studies' field set out a social constructionist approach to childhood, outlined in the quote from James, Jenks and Prout above. Since then there have been calls for understandings of childhood to bridge biological – social frameworks (see for example Ryan, 2012).

Consideration of the historical emergence of childhood has become a key area of academic interest and contextualises contemporary understandings of childhood. Childhood has developed as a topic for inquiry recently; as Clarke (2004) comments for much of historical investigation children were generally ignored. The emergence of historical interest in childhoods questioned whether childhood is a distinctly modern construct rather than a biologically grounded, universal

experience. Claims for the emergence of childhood range from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century through the 1900's (Clarke, 2004; Cunningham, 2006). Aries' (1996) landmark study made the bold claim that childhood did not exist during or prior to the medieval period sparked interest in the history of childhood. His analysis, largely drawn from art, argued that there was no division between children and adults within medieval society. Aries concluded that childhood was not natural or universal stage of life but instead had developed in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as understandings of children as innately innocent and a growing interest in their education changed the cultural landscape. However Aries' claims have been subject to significant challenges, ranging from the methods he employed, his interpretation of data and his analysis (Hanawalt, 1993; Heywood, 2001; Pollock, 1983; Wilson, 1980). Academic analysis of the history of childhood now explores much earlier childhoods (see for example Volk, 2011). Despite these criticisms Aries' argument that childhood is not a natural or universal state remains significant in the history of childhood studies for encouraging critical explorations of the construction of childhood.

In the wake of Aries' study the Romantic period has emerged as a site for significant claims for the development of modern conceptions of childhood (Cunningham, 2006) and this Romantic discourse of childhood forms part of the theoretical framework for this thesis. While Richardson (2008) notes that elements of the 'Romantic child' appear earlier than the 18<sup>th</sup> Century he argues that it remained an idea confined to the social elite. In his exploration of how the concept of childhood was democratized during the Romantic era Richardson points to a number of

factors, amongst them Locke's (1989) ideas of the malleability of children and Rousseau's (1969) thoughts on childhood innocence. Claims that the Romantic period witnessed the modern creation of childhood revolve around defining childhood as a time of nature and innocence. The emergence of the Romantic child requires more detailed exploration because of the significance of these ideas for contemporary articulations of childhood.

Rousseau was a key thinker in the discursive construction of a 'Romantic childhood' as one rooted in nature. His model of childhood education was published in *Emile* (1961). Rousseau wrote *Emile* as a critique of existing ideas around the nature of childhood, such as those argued by Locke who focused on the nurturing process as a way to shape who children would become. The distinctions between Locke and Rousseau's ideas of childhood have been discussed (see for example Cunningham, 2006 and Oelkers, 1994). The importance that Rousseau placed on childhood as a state in and of itself is evidenced in the following quote: 'they are always looking for the man in the child, without thinking of what he was before he became a man' (1961: xlii). *Emile* is Rousseau's template for the education of children and argues for role of nature in this. Through *Emile* Rousseau's emphasis on a natural education works to situate childhood within the realm of the natural, in contrast to adulthood which is located in culture. The divide between childhood as a state of nature and adulthood as residing in culture led Rousseau to argue, 'everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Author of Nature; but everything degenerates in the hands of man' (1961: 1).

The link between childhood and nature enables childhood to be understood as a



moral state. As Taylor argues, 'Rousseau's thinking marks the pivotal moment at which concepts of nature and of childhood emerge... to become the locus of essential goodness' (2011: 422), which is central to modern understandings of childhood. Furthermore Taylor argues that this Romantic understanding of childhood as part of the natural world 'evoked an original higher order state of purity and innocence' (2011: 423). As part of their closeness to nature Rousseau argued that children possessed 'original innocence' as they had not been corrupted by adult culture. Rousseau's concern that children's original innocence could be corrupted by adults and their culture frames childhood as a state in need of protection. In his discussion of the significance of the figure of the Romantic child Richardson argues, 'in the wake of Romanticism the arguments for state-supported, progressive education, for social legislation to assure child welfare, and for the curtailment of child labor could rest on that simple, and that powerful, a foundation' (2008: 173). The articulation of a Romantic discourse of childhood converged through different arenas of social life with two key results. First it formulated a clear distinction between adulthood and childhood, second it embedded values within these separate spheres, and through this childhood came to be defined by natural innocence.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Britain children's move from producers to their new status as consumers redefined childhood. This new positioning was the gradual result of a number of factors; from legal changes that reduced the number of hours children could work in a series of Factory Acts (Cotton Mills and Factories Act, 1819, Factories Act 1833, Factories Act 1844 and Factory and Workshop Act 1878), to the

introduction of universal primary education (Elementary Education Act, 1870) and cultural shifts (Cunningham, 2006). Zelizer argues that modern childhood has been cast as sacred, 'the emergence of this economically "worthless" but emotionally "priceless" child has created an essential condition of contemporary childhood' (1985: 3).

### **2.2.1. Contemporary childhood and the death of childhood discourses**

Contemporary understandings of childhood emerged through the increasing separation of adulthood and childhood marked by boundaries. In her discussion exploring the construction of contemporary childhood Meyer (2007) argues that there are three key discourses: discourse of innocence, discourse of risk and discourse of rights, which work to produce childhood. One or more of these discourses might gain prominence depending on the situation or social issues raised. Meyer (2007) notes that the discourse of innocence constructs children as virtuous, pure, angelic and innocent also produces the conception of children as immature, ignorant, weak and vulnerable. The effect of children's positioning as vulnerable and weak in discourses of childhood means that they are also placed in need of adult protection. The discursive construction of childhood described by Meyer leads to some forms of knowledge being denied to children as part of the separation of childhood and adulthood (see also Robinson and Davies, 2008). Meyer argues that sexual knowledge emerges as a significant boundary dividing childhood and adulthood where children are positioned as asexual and adults as sexual. The separation of childhood and sexuality is heightened because of

children's vulnerable status leading Robinson (2012) to argue that sexual knowledge has been increasingly regulated under a protectionist discourse.

### The death of childhood

There have been lamentations over the 'death of childhood' from a number of fields. At the turn of the century Buckingham concluded that 'debates about childhood have become invested with a growing sense of anxiety and panic' (2000: 3). These concerns over children and the existence of childhood have become a key feature of childhood discourses (Cunningham, 1995). *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman, 1994), *The Hurried Child* (Elkind, 2007) and *Toxic Childhood* (Palmer, 2006) are examples of significant contributions and voices in contemporary concerns over the death of childhood.

The similarities between these texts reflect key concerns within the death of childhood discourses as within them new media environments and technology are seen as a cause for the disappearance of childhood. Postman (1994) argues that television does not distinguish between audiences unlike other forms of media such as literature, and therefore children are let into the adult world of secrets eroding the distinction between childhood and adulthood. Furthermore Elkind (2007) notes that access to harmful media have expanded with increased accessibility to the Internet. Likewise Palmer (2006) raises concerns with the effect of technology on children's behavior. Moreover Palmer argues that consumer culture is combined with media, having a damaging influence on children. The focus on media, and more recently technology, as a causing harm to childhood has been a feature of discourses of childhood since the emergence of mass media I take up how this is

gendered in Chapter 3. The first research exploring the effect of the media on children, The Payne Fund Studies were undertaken between 1929 and 1932 to address public concerns over the influence of the cinema on children (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller, 1996). Concerns for the death of childhood are often gendered, as each of the authors discussed above present girls' access to a precocious sexuality, often demonstrated through the 'adultification' of girls' clothing invoking sexuality, as evidence of the erosion of childhood. The gendering of threats to childhood, such as the sexualisation of girls, is explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Whilst there have been academic criticisms of the death of childhood rhetoric it retains appeal in public discourses of childhood. Buckingham (2011) argues that Palmer's account of toxic childhood is a rejection of modernity and the book is nostalgic for an imagined childhood of the past. In his critique Buckingham examines the lack of evidence for Palmer's claims and concludes that her argument is an emotional one that draws on nostalgia for a past childhood.

As childhood becomes an increasingly vulnerable space, public anxiety over the state of childhood is heightened which explains the persistence of the 'death of childhood' discourses. Kehily (2010) argues that the discourse of childhood in crisis draws on Romantic ideas of childhood innocence and protection. Discourses of childhood 'at risk' or 'in crisis' shape understandings of parenthood to such an extent that Jackson and Scott (1999) argue parents are presented with responsibility for their children as part of a wider process of individualization, which is bound up with their own life projects. Parents' responsibility to guard against

present threads to their children is extended to include future threats to their adulthood (Jackson and Scott, 1999).

Put in a historical context the nature of childhood as in crisis can be seen, not as a new feature but as part of the landscape of childhood, as Kehily's analysis demonstrates that the crisis of childhood can be understood as a cyclical moral panic. Significant contemporary moral panics, notably the sexualisation of girls, commercialisation of childhood and technologisation of childhood form an important contextual basis for this thesis. The former discourses are subsequently explored in the next section of this chapter and the latter in the next chapter.

### **2.3.Theoretical framework: postfeminism, neoliberalism and contemporary discourses of girlhood**

In this section I set out the second aspect of the theoretical framework used in this thesis, postfeminist, neoliberal discourses of 'Girl Power'. I draw on the field of girlhood studies to explore a number of interlinking discourses that shape understandings of contemporary girlhood. I begin by discussing postfeminism, I focus on consumerism and youthfulness as aspect of postfeminist culture as they are relevant for this thesis. In the following section I take up this discussion and explore how articulations of girlhood in a 'Girl Power' discourse use a postfeminist and neoliberal framework. I go on to outline the similarities between neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities, and the importance of girlhood to both. Following this I turn to examine two moral discourses articulating anxieties over girlhood; the sexualisation of girls and the commercialisation of childhood. I link this discussion back to understandings of the Romantic child outlined in the previous section.

Historically within the broader field of youth culture studies boys' cultural narratives were the focus of academic analysis and girls were viewed as secondary figures. As Hudson (1984) argues adolescence itself is a gendered concept as the behaviors and attitudes associated with it are masculine characteristics. However the gendered bias within academia towards male youth cultures was challenged during the Second-Wave Feminist Movement, which highlighted girls' cultures as research sites in their own right. The 1970's and 1980's saw a growth in research exploring girls' culture examining their uses and experiences, beginning a distinctive field of girlhood studies.

### **2.3.1. Postfeminist and neoliberal theoretical framework**

'Postfeminism happened without warning. It seemed to arrive from nowhere. One minute there were feminisms...the next...it was all over' (1995: 3) note Coppock, Haydon and Richter. Postfeminism is both a historically and culturally specific phenomenon, emerging in the 1990's in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. It is a problematic term to define, and as such has been used to describe and analyse a variety of phenomena (Gamble, 2006). In this thesis I draw on McRobbie's (2007) and Tasker and Negra's (2007) theoretical understandings of postfeminism.

In McRobbie's much quoted essay on postfeminism she argues that 'for feminism to be 'taken into account' it has to be understood as having already passed away' (2007). In more general terms Tasker and Negra define postfeminism as centered on the 'pastness of feminism'. Postfeminism is an understanding that feminism is

no longer needed because the feminist gains of Second Wave Feminist Movement created a culture of equality. Within this cultural framework feminism is constructed as aged and out of place in contemporary society while on the other hand postfeminist culture is framed as youthful. This structure enforces generational differences that remove feminists from contemporary culture even further. McRobbie argues this is demonstrated through generational audiences where younger viewers understand the irony in a sexist image and 'get the joke'. Within postfeminist culture women are able to return to their enjoyment of feminine desires, which works to re-essentialise gender differences between women and men. Tween girls and tween culture converge with the postfeminism focus on consumption and youthfulness as discussed by McRobbie and Tasker and Negra, I now turn to explore these areas.

### Consumer culture in postfeminism

Tasker and Negra (2007) emphasise the role of consumer culture in the construction of a postfeminist femininity, they argue that postfeminist culture 'works to commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as an empowered consumer' (2007: 2). Drawing together femininity and consumption has, Coulter (2005) argues, been prevalent since the post war era. The boom of consumer culture meant that the affluent housewife was positioned as the ideal consumer and this led to the creation of distinctions between male and female consumption practices. Coulter (2005) suggests that while men were viewed as rational, autonomous and had power to withstand advertising pressures, women were

constructed as lacking these qualities. Within an essentialist framework this left women characterised as impulsive, passive and irrational, and due to this vulnerable to advertising. Consumer culture has an intrinsic role in postfeminism. Fairclough (2008) argues that it is through participation in consumerism that women demonstrate their empowered femininity. The process of women demonstrating their postfeminist empowerment through consumerism has been explored by a number of authors notably by Negra (2004) in her analysis of *Sex and The City* and Gill (2008) in her analysis of the makeover genre. Tasker and Negra argue that 'postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self' (2007: 2). This definition of postfeminism locates consumption as central for postfeminist subjectivity in similar ways to tween culture and will be discussed later in this chapter.

### Youthfulness in postfeminism

Age and aging have been topics of interest within analysis of postfeminist culture. Girlhood has been identified as a key site within postfeminist popular culture as it privileges youthfulness (see Tasker and Negra, 2007). Within postfeminism this expression of youth works to age feminism, making the denouncing of feminism part of expressions of postfeminist femininity. As McRobbie argues, 'the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique to count as a modern sophisticated girl' (2009: 18). Postfeminist girlhood requires girls to perform 'hyper femininity'. Jackson and Vares (2010) point to examples of



cultural artefacts, for example t-shirts displaying the slogan 'Recess Flirt' to demonstrate this postfeminist sensibility. Postfeminist girlhood distances girls from feminism, reinforced by the articulation of Girl Power girlhood. Both Taft (2004) and Griffin (2004) argue that the Girl Power discourse is inherently postfeminist because the 'can do' attitude assumes that girls grow up in a state of equality thereby implying the pastness of feminism. Articulations of the 'Girl Power' discourse and how this shapes understandings of contemporary girlhood are discussed later in this chapter.

Additionally girls occupy a significant position in wider cultural discourses as the figure of the girl has come to embody both success and (potential) risk. The use of the figure of the girl to articulate hope and concern has meant girlhood has risen to cultural prominence. Projansky (2007) explores the simultaneous emergence of this growing cultural discussion of girls with postfeminism. She notes five reasons for the convergence of these discourses, first the emphasis on youthful femininity in popular culture. Second, girls represent potential for future opportunities. Third girlhood as a life stage highlights postfeminist sensibilities because the girl is always in progress. Fourth, girlhood presents a consumer market that can be sold to both women and girls. Finally contemporary girlhood is the product of postfeminism, and anxiety over girls is therefore concern over postfeminist culture. Girls are cast as the ideal subjects within postfeminist discourse for two reasons. First as female girls are the perfect consumer, entrenching previous gendered conceptions of consumption. Second girls are young and postfeminist culture privileges youthfulness.

### Neoliberalism

The emergence of neoliberalism is associated with the Reagan administration in the United States and Thatcher's government in the United Kingdom. Gill and Scharff define neoliberalism as 'a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state' (2011: 5). In this thesis I am interested in the cultural implications of neoliberalism. Gill notes the shift in discussing neoliberalism as political or economic to 'a mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres' (2008: 163).

Rose (1999) argues that within neoliberalism individual social actors are framed as free and autonomous and who have the ability to choose from a range of potential options. Any structural, material or cultural constraints on this choice are not explored. Neoliberal structural changes noted by Gill and Scharff above require neoliberal subjects to develop particular neoliberal attitudes and behaviors. As Gill and Scharff argue neoliberal subjects are required to be 'self-managing, autonomous and enterprising' (2011: 5). Furthermore Pomerantz argues 'neoliberalism is a discourse that touts the personal characteristics of flexibility, hard work, adaptability, and self-reliance in order to foster a subject who will thrive in the economic, political and social realities of the new global order' (2009: 152). The wider neoliberal structure produces a need for neoliberal subjects. The subjectivities required for postfeminist and neoliberal structures and cultures are similar: I now turn to examine the convergence of these discourses.

### The convergence of postfeminism and neoliberalism

Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that there are three areas of convergence between postfeminism and neoliberalism. First, Gill and Scharff (2011) note that both discourses privilege a form of individualism that is based on the values of choice and autonomy. McRobbie (2009) explores this convergence of the postfeminism and neoliberalism in discourses of individual choice and freedom, pointing to the work of Giddens and Beck, she argues that there has been a shift towards life politics that does not recognize feminist struggles. Within the framework of life politics individuals are given agency to construct their own lives, which McRobbie argues ignores gender inequalities and presents choice as unconstrained.

Second postfeminist and neoliberal subjectivities resemble one another, as Gill and Scharff summarize the 'autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, free choosing, self-inventing subject of postfeminism' (2011: 7). Moreover, Koffman and Gill suggest that there is a class dimension to the ideal subjects of both discourses where middle class girls are positioned as 'hardworking, entrepreneurial authors of their own 'choice biographies'' (2013: 87). Discussing 'choice biographies' Tincknell (2011) argues that the 'toxic character' of neoliberalism has reclaimed feminism through these 'self-projects'. A further significant area of overlap in neoliberal and postfeminist discourses is the use of consumer culture as a route to empowerment (Lazar, 2011).

Finally Gill and Scharff (2011) propose that within both discourses women are the ideal subjects and are called upon to embody the subjectivities outlined above. Postfeminism and neoliberalism converge within discussions of contemporary girlhood, for example Harris' (2004) 'future girl' with her 'can do', or 'DIY' attitude epitomizes the values explored in this section. Within these cultural frameworks Kehily (2008) argues that it is young women who are seen as able to do it all and have it all. Girls have emerged as embodying neoliberal, postfeminist values such as choice, agency, independence and empowerment. Koffman and Gill (2014) argue that this imagining of girls stands in sharp contrast with ideas of young men who are perceived as being in a state of crisis. In their analysis of the convergence of these discourses Gill and Schaff (2011) argue that postfeminist culture is constructed through a neoliberal landscape and not only as a backlash to feminism.

### **2.3.2. Contemporary girlhood**

Harris (2004) argues that as girls become articulated as neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities they become subject to both celebration and concern. These contemporary constructions of girlhood can be understood through two discourses, Girl Power and 'at risk' girls, both as products of the particular social and political milieu.

#### **2.3.2.1. *Girl Power***

Girl Power has emerged as a key discourse shaping articulations of contemporary girlhood. The rhetoric of Girl Power rose to prominence in the 1990's through a

range of popular cultural artefacts. Girl Power's central quality was a positive embrace of the term girl. Whelehan (2000) argues that the Spice Girls transformed popular usage of the term girl and in doing so it became a positive, independent and liberating term for young women to identify with. The public declaration of Girl Power as positive stood in sharp contrast to much academic discussion exploring the derogatory use of the term girl (see for example Doyle, 1998).

Harris argues that Girl Power presented an 'image of young women as independent, successful, and self-inventing' (2004: 16), and growing from a DIY culture the articulation of a 'can do' girlhood became embedded with notions of choice and focused on the self as a project. Part of the 'can do' discourse of girlhood is that girls' work on the self leads to success at education and work, and Harris (2004) argues this underlines the values of meritocracy within a neoliberal, postfeminist framework. Girls' success is demonstrated and measured through their ability to participate in consumer lifestyle and as outlined earlier this is also central to notions of empowerment within a postfeminist and neoliberal framework. Taft (2004) discusses four aspects to the Girl Power discourses; antifeminism, postfeminism, individual power and consumer power. She argues that these come together to present girls as non-critical passive subjects.

### 1. Girl Power as antifeminist

Discourses of Girl Power and in particular the articulation of this discourse by the *Spice Girls* have been the sites for academic debate discussing how these attitudes

can be considered feminist and/ or antifeminist. Wald examines the Spice Girls' attitude as 'promoting a playful, if equivocally feminist, notion of "girl power" (1998: 586). Furthermore Taft (2004) argues that this form of Girl Power is non-political and non-threatening to the patriarchal social order. Instead Girl Power discourses present girls with a non-political discourse to express their positivity.

### 2. Girl Power as postfeminist

The rise of a Girl Power discourse coincided with a significant backlash 'against' feminism (see Faludi, 1992). The backlash discourse positioned feminism as irrelevant whilst simultaneously presented caricatured ideas of feminists as old and out of touch. In comparison with this public discourse of feminism Girl Power was presented as young and energetic. Taft (2004) argues that the articulation of Girl Power was postfeminist as the idea that girls can do anything reaffirms the belief that equality has been achieved and in doing so reinforces the idea that there is no need for feminism. Academic analysis of the Spice Girls' sexuality has been discussed as a public demonstration of their self-confidence and choice (Lemish, 2003 and Driscoll, 1999). Furthermore Zaslow (2009) comments on the Girl Power discourse articulated by the Spice Girls as one where the ability to control relationships is part of female solidarity. This sexual and relationship power demonstrates that equality has been reached, if not that girls have too much power, a backlash discussed by Taft (2004).

### 3. Girl Power as individual power

Girl Power is framed within a culture of choice and empowerment, presenting girls with the idea they have control over their lives (Whelehan, 2000). Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) argue that Girl Power unites girls and presents them with the illusion they can do anything. However this notion contrasts with girls' experiences of the job market and education opportunities that are heavily structured around class and ethnicity. Taft (2004) compares Girl Power to traditional liberal feminism, arguing that in similar ways these discourses ignore social and cultural barriers to participation. Girl Power discourses utilise notions of agency and choice whilst masking barriers in similar ways to postfeminism and neoliberalism that I discussed in the previous section.

### 4. Girl Power as consumer power

Taft (2004) argues that the consumer basis for articulations of a Girl Power discourse results in girls' social power being articulated as consumer power. Girls' route to achieving empowerment through consumer culture, evident in discourses of Girl Power championed by the *Spice Girls*, mirrors the postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity already outlined in this chapter. The reframing of social power as consumer power has heightened girls' profile as a key consumer group (Zaslow, 2009). Hentges (2006) is critical of the consumerist basis for the Girl Power discourse as it privileges and legitimises particular articulations of girlhood. Girls who fall outside these notions, as they do not have financial capital, are either

rendered invisible or they are, 'the outcast, the loser, the slut' (2006: 8). Jackson and Westrupp (2010) suggest that Girl Power achieved through consumption continues to dominate contemporary articulations of girlhood. Within this framework girls are positioned as consumers first and foremost. The consumer nature of girl culture, with particular reference to tween culture is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

### ***2.3.2.2. 'At risk' girls***

In contrast to Harris' empowered 'can do' girls and discourses of Girl Power discussed above contemporary girlhood is also articulated through a counter discourse producing understandings of girls as 'at risk'. Kehily argues that 'at risk' girls 'articulate a set of moral and social concerns in relation to young women' (2008: 59). Harris notes that there is 'general moral concern about juvenile delinquency, nihilism and antisocial attitudes' (2004: 25). Harris argues that class and race structure these concerns, where girls from poorer socio- economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities are considered 'at risk'. This discourse of 'at risk' girlhood ignores structural disadvantages and instead frames girls 'failures' as individual, family or community based (Harris, 2004, Griffin, 2004 and Kehily, 2008).

Again success and consumption are sites for concern for 'at risk' girlhood. Harris argues that 'at risk' girls are presented as risking their futures because they are not ambitious, 'success is deemed to elude her because she cannot effectively apply herself' (2004: 27). Furthermore education is seen as a protective factor in avoiding becoming 'at risk' and Harris notes that education is 'touted as the most effective



weapon against disaffection, criminality and disenfranchisement' (2004: 27 – 28).

Within the discourse of 'at risk' girlhood their lack of educational success is compounded by moral concerns over teenage pregnancy.

Furthermore Griffin (1997) argues that 'at risk' girls are framed as participating in 'disordered consumption'. The girls who might use illegal drugs, alcohol or tobacco are considered to be getting consumption 'wrong'. Harris (2004) suggests that these patterns of consumption feed into discourse of 'at risk' girls in which girls are presented as becoming more 'laddish'. The construction of 'can do' girlhood and 'at risk' girlhood are articulated through a focus on personal effort and making 'good' choices. Both discourses ignore structural advantage and disadvantage in the realisation of these positions.

### **2.3.3. Moral panics and contemporary girlhood: The sexualisation of girls and the commercialisation of childhood**

Girlhood is a site where a range of political and social concerns as well as academic commentary converges. These concerns are often articulated as moral panics in the media, and form part of reporting culture that led McRobbie and Thornton to argue that 'moral panics have become the way in which daily events are brought to the attention of the public' (1995: 560). The sexualisation of girls and the commercialisation of childhood are two significant discourses that are central to contextualising the milieu of tween girlhood negotiated on the websites examined and the analytic discussion in this thesis. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter the technologisation of childhood and within this girls' use of technology are other intersecting aspects of public concern over contemporary girlhood that I

examine in the following literature chapter.

Taken together these overarching discourses raise concerns with the state of contemporary girlhood and form part of the 'death of childhood' rhetoric that I mentioned earlier in the chapter. Concerns over inappropriate sexualisation and commercialisation frame contemporary girl culture. The growing media commentary concerned with the sexualisation and commercialisation of girls took on a political edge with the commissioning of three high profile research projects within the UK; *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing* (Buckingham, 2009), one year later, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (Papadopoulos, 2010), closely followed by *Let children be children* (Bailey, 2011). These concerns are replicated across other countries where research examining these issues is prevalent. This flurry of commissioned research on the interlinking concerns of commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood suggests mounting public and governmental anxiety over the state of contemporary girlhood.

### ***2.3.3.1. The sexualisation of girlhood***

Examining the historical context for contemporary concerns over the sexualisation of girls Egan and Hawkes (2008) argue that fears over childhood sexuality are inherently paradoxical in which children's natural asexuality is assumed alongside calls for regulation of their sexuality once it has been initiated. The anxieties over girls' precocious sexuality justify calls for increasing regulation. Contemporary concerns with the sexualisation of girls are contextualised within historical accounts and the discourse of Romantic childhood. Furthermore Weeks argues that,

‘debates about sexuality are debates about the nature of society’ (2003: 36) which frames heightened anxieties over the sexualisation of girls.

Contemporary concerns over the sexualisation of girls have intensified through different modes of commentary such as media, public policy and academic discourse across Europe, North America and Australia. Key pieces of policy literature in the field include *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia* (2006), *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls* (2007), *A Review of the Sexualisation of Young People* (2010) and *Letting Children be Children* (2011). These concerns are amplified through extensive media commentary on the topic. While there are different iterations of the discourse of sexualisation through these various modes they converge over the identification of sexualisation as problematic for girls (Duschinsky, 2013). These differing articulations of the sexualisation of girls echo and strengthen each other and in doing so deepen a public discourse of concern around the state of girlhood, which is further amplified in combination with fears over commercialisation and technology. In this section I discuss the production of the sexualisation of girls discourse and focus on *Letting Children be Children* (2011) and *Review of the Sexualisation of Young People* (2010) as significant policy voices in UK discourses of girlhood. There are many voices that come together in the articulation of the sexualisation of girls discourse and part of this in the overlapping of feminist and right wing concerns.

The term sexualisation was first used in the UK media in 1993, in an article published by the Independent discussing a photograph of Kate Moss. The reporter, Hume, commented that ‘we were given pictures of a pubescent child wearing the

semi – see – thru sexy underwear of a knowing adult’ (Hume, 1993). Duschinsky and Barker argue that after this point sexualisation referred to ‘social and moral corruption of girls by impure sexual representation in the commercial media’ (2013: 731). Egan and Hawkes (2008) note the use of the following terms to describe girls who are ‘knowing adults’; ‘skant’, ‘prostitut’ and ‘kinderwhore’, who dress ‘like a stripper’, wear ‘hooker chic’ and want to be ‘hot’ or ‘sexy’. Egan and Hawkes argue that because of her positioning as sexually knowing ‘she is the antithesis of dominant constructions of girlhood innocence – seduced by the media she has become seductive and transgressive’ (2008: 305).

### Feminist discourses

Duschinsky and Barker (2013) argue that from 1993 sexualisation was framed as a feminist issue within public discussion as part of critiques of postfeminism. Within postfeminist culture female sexuality is positioned as a demonstration of women’s empowerment and agency to choose. Therefore feminist critiques of a sexualised culture could be dismissed because the privileging of the ‘choice discourse’. However in reframing sexualisation concerns to focus on the sexualisation of girlhood feminists could voice their critiques of a postfeminist misogynistic culture through drawing on the cultural image of the girl who had been corrupted and harmed by a sexualised postfeminist culture. Constructing girls as ‘at risk’ from this culture enabled a feminist critique to participate in dialogue around the harmful effect of a toxic culture on girls. This was achieved in a way that could not be successful with adults because of the dominance of discourses of choice and

empowerment within postfeminism (Duschinsky, 2013). The effect of the construction of girls as innocent and the labeling of sexualised products and images as harmful led to the production of a developmental discourse and concerns around sexualisation were now framed as problematic for a normal development.

The developmental discourse framing the sexualisation of girls gained traction within broader public discourses and is evidenced within two key policy reviews, *The Sexualisation of Young People Review* (2010) and *Letting Children be Children* (2011). *The Sexualisation of Young People Review* defines sexualisation as, 'the imposition of adult sexuality onto children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it mentally, emotionally or physically' (2010: 6). The choice of language in this definition reveals a particular understanding of childhood and sexualisation as an adult knowledge is presented as *imposing* itself on the innocent world of childhood. The use of the word 'imposing' communicates the construction of childhood as a natural, separate and protected time that is at risk from premature sexualisation reflecting the Romantic childhood discourse discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Likewise *Letting Children be Children* reports that parents 'clearly wanted their own children to have the space and time to grow and develop mentally, physically and emotionally ... sexualisation accelerates that process in a way that parents do not like, and that some parents worry could be harmful' (2011: 43). The power afforded to sexualised images and products in these discourse lies in their ability to initiate girls' (premature) sexuality (Egan and Hawkes, 2008). In both of these extracts the imposition of sexualisation on childhood innocence is framed by and condemned as harmful to young girls'

‘normal’ development.

### Right Wing discourses

Duschinsky (2013) explores the way that these feminist discourses of sexualisation were co-opted and used by Right Wing narratives. Instead of the discourse opening up a dialogue to discuss the misogynist forms of postfeminist culture, the sexualisation concerns raised by feminists were mobilized to justify the control and regulation of girls and the content of the public sphere. Right Wing claims were strengthened by situating the concerns for the sexualisation of girls within a developmental framework. Duschinsky and Barker (2013) suggest that the conflation of sexism and sexuality within feminist discourses enabled a Right Wing reframing of sexualisation fears.

Before and during his time as Prime Minister David Cameron has become a significant voice in mobilising the Right Wing discourse of sexualisation. In a speech he said, ‘the protection of childhood innocence against premature sexualisation is something worth fighting for’ (Cameron, 2006). His stance against the ‘creepy’ sexualisation of childhood became a core feature of the Conservative Party’s policy on families and children (Duschinsky and Barker, 2013). Tackling the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood became part of both the Conservatives’ and Liberal Democrats’ Coalition Agreement where they pledged to, ‘take action to protect children from excessive commercialization and premature sexualisation’

(HM Government, 2010). As part of this commitment the Coalition Government commissioned Reg Bailey CEO the Mother's Union to write a report on the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood. The review, *Letting Children be Children* (2011) bolstered the Right Wing narrative of sexualisation through privileging parental choice and responsibility. This is clear in the conclusion to the report, which argues that 'parents are the experts in deciding whether something is appropriate for their child' (2011: 8). Duschinsky and Barker (2013) argue that Bailey's review of sexualisation and commercialisation report supports Conservative neoliberal ideas of responsibility and a lack of state control. Whilst coming from two distinctive different positions Right Wing discourses of concern over the sexualisation of girls overlap with feminist critiques of sexualised culture. Both discourses construct girls as vulnerable to the effects of an exploitative (over) sexualised culture and call for regulation. However feminist critiques of sexualisation are concerned with the increasing sexualised nature of culture where as Right Wing discourses focus on the effect that this culture has on girls.

### Contemporary policy: the sexualisation of girls

The first UK review into the sexualisation of girls, *The Sexualisation of Young People* was commissioned by the Labour Government in 2009 and authored by Papadopoulos a psychologist. Duschinsky (2012) argues that the Labour Government's choice of Papadoplous reflects a decision to produce a high profile report and underscores their commitment to the empowerment of women. Following the publication of Papadoplous' review concerns over the sexualisation of

girls within media discourses were amplified. The second review; *Letting Children be Children*, was commissioned within these heightened discourses of concern by the Coalition Government, who appointed Reg Bailey CEO of the Mother's Union to conduct the report. The key findings and recommendations from these two recent policy reviews are outlined in the section. *The Sexualisation of Young People Review* (2010) investigates the effects of 'hypersexualisation' and 'hypermasculinity' on children and young people's development and cultural norms. The review argues that there has been an increase in sexualised content as well as access to such content and argues 'with proliferation comes normalization' (2010: 7). In looking at the effects of sexualisation the review focuses on: the link between sexualisation of culture and violence against women, girls' body image and the mainstreaming of the sex industry. The Review calls for sexualisation to be seen as harmful so that potential risks can be explored and mitigated against. *The Sexualisation of Young People Review* recommended improving media education within schools, raising awareness of the issues and encouraging research in the field.

*Letting Children be Children* (2011) explores four main themes. First, issues around cultural consumption by children and a discussion of how to regulate this. Second, concerns around sexualised and gender-stereotyped clothing, products and services. Third, the commercialisation of childhood, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section of this chapter. Fourth, facilitating parents' voices to be heard. The report recommends a series of measures directed towards regulators and parents to enable parents to take responsibility.



### Critiquing policy discourses

Within the broad area of research and discussions of the sexualisation of girls discourse there have been significant criticisms. In reviewing criticisms of the field Smith and Attwood (2011) identify four key critiques: the term sexualisation is applied to a range of phenomenon; the evidence presented is often one sided and over simplified; ignores bodies of work on gender, media and body and; the view of sex is often conservative and negative. In examining Papadopoulos' and Bailey's reviews there are three specific critiques: working definitions of sexualisation; assumptions, choice and use of evidence; and voice.

#### 1. Definitions of sexualisation

Both Bailey's *Letting Children be Children* and Papadopoulos' *Review of the Sexualisation of Young People* have been criticised over lacking rigor in their definitions of sexualisation. Smith (2010) argues that Papadopoulos does not give an account of her working definition of sexualisation. This, Smith suggests is because the term sexualisation benefits from vague notions and a lack of theory, Papadopoulos' use of the term is simplistic and suggests that it covers a single object of concern. Smith notes that the review makes no attempt to unpack the complex discourse of sexualisation itself. Furthermore Smith and Attwood argue that the review confuses a number of concepts, 'adult sexuality with sexual objectification or gender stereotyping; and hypersexualisation with hyperfeminism'

(2011: 329). In doing so, they argue, Papadopoulos confuses discourses of development with politics, culture and sexuality.

In a similar vein Barker and Duschinsky (2012) present an in depth critique of the use of sexualisation in *Letting Children be Children*. They argue that Bailey presents four objects of concern that emerge together as 'early sexualisation'. These are: 'sexually suggestive' content and practices; treatment of women as only sexual; encourage 'children to think of themselves (or others to think of children) as adult or sexual'; and the normalization of 'deviant' behavior (Bailey, 2011: 4). Barker and Duschinsky critique these four attributes of sexualisation; first they argue that the treatment of women as only sexual is a concern with sexism rather than sexualisation. Second they argue that concerns with sexually suggestive content and the perception of children as sexual problematize teenage sexuality. Finally they argue that concern about the normalization of deviant behavior is explicitly conservative. In deconstructing these components of sexualisation in *Letting Children be Children* (2011) Barker and Duschinsky (2012) argue Bailey frames concerns as an emotional issue and within a common sense approach.

## 2. Assumptions in reviews

*The Review of the Sexualisation of Young People* has been critiqued for lacking a critical understanding of evidence and in doing so making broad assumptions that are not supported by academic research. In Smith and Attwood's (2011) critique

they argue that the core assumption of the review, the link between sexualisation of culture and violence towards girls and women, is not underpinned by evidence. Furthermore Smith (2010) argues that Papadopoulos draws on evidence from the now discredited media effects field to strengthen her assumption of the link between violence against girls and sexualisation. Similarly in their analysis of *Letting Children be Children* Baker and Duschinsky (2012) examine Bailey's assumptions of gender essentialism. In the review Bailey argues that there are 'innate gender differences' (2011: 49) predicting play; this assumption Barker and Duschinsky argue, reveals a lack of understanding of history and neuroscience.

### 3. Voice

Smith (2010) notes the lack of young people's voices throughout the evidence used in *Review of the Sexualisation of Young People*. Bragg's (2012) analysis of the review illustrates how Papadopoulos rejects children's perceptions and understandings; instead sexualisation is seen as having an unconscious effect on their development. Smith (2010) concludes that the report replicates anxieties over young people's cultural consumption without engaging with a field of research exploring young people's perceptions. In the introduction to *Letting Children be Children* Bailey emphasizes the consultation process with parents and young people to include their perspectives. These parental opinions are presented in sound bites and are presented throughout the review to illustrate and support the discussion. However the children's voices that were consulted for the review are missing from the report (Bragg, 2012). The constant repetition of parent's voices throughout the review

masks the lack of representation of children's views. Moreover Barker and Duschinsky (2012) argue that despite gender stereotyping noted as a clear concern of parents, and the impact of this evidenced in research, the Bailey review omits this and instead chooses to focus on sexualisation.

### Critiques of sexualisation discourses

Discussing the sexualisation of girls discourse Egan and Hawkes (2008) identify four problematic assumptions: sexualisation as a universal process; construction of children as passive; deterministic attitude conflating sexual expression with sexualisation; and the reproduction of patriarchal and moralizing beliefs. Framing children as a passive audience does not give them agency to interpret and negotiate media images and Egan and Hawkes (2008) argue that this assumption of the child audience explains the absence of work decoding sexualised images that feature in concerns over sexualisation. Furthermore they argue that this assumption of audience is gendered, as boys are absent from sexualisation concerns it is implicitly girls who are unable to decipher media images. However a number of research studies have demonstrated the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of children's and parent's understandings of sexualisation, for example Mitchell et al.'s (2010) research on children's understandings of the Playboy bunny logo and Buckingham and Bragg's (2013) research on parental attitudes to sexualisation. In addition further analysis of the production and articulation of the sexualisation discourse uncovers class and race based assumptions about childhood innocence. Duschinsky argues that 'the division

between pure and impure femininities is a division coded and organized along classed and raced lines, and policed by the threat of rape' (2013: 356). Sexualisation is seen as threatening a white, middle class, heterosexual girlhood, leading Gill (2012) to argue for an intersectional approach in exploring these issues.

Public anxiety around the sexualisation of girls is intense because sexuality is a key boundary between childhood and adulthood as I discussed in this chapter, and sexual knowledge has a role in maintaining this distinction (Buckingham, 1993). Sexualisation has particular concerns for girlhood as it risks drawing girls into the adult world of sexuality and ultimately attracting male attention (Harris, 2005). Sexualisation risks girlhood in two ways, first sexualised images cross age appropriate values and second, sexualisation harms normal development. Not only does the sexualisation of girls stand in stark contrast to the innocent realm of ideal childhood it threatens the developmental framework of the child as 'in progress' and harms this natural order. In order to maintain these boundaries Holland et al. (1992) argues that there must be a continuous effort to repress girls' sexuality in order for the boundaries of childhood to remain secure. The public and political desire to protect the nature of asexual childhood elevates the discourse of innocence and justifies calls for tougher regulation on all kinds of cultural artefacts and of girls' interactions with culture. In examining the articulation of the sexualisation of girlhood Ringrose (2011) and Gill (2012) have argued that there has been a polarisation of perspectives. Where on the one hand there is a disapproval of sex and calls for increasing regulation of young people, whilst on the other, sexualisation concerns are framed as a moral panic that positions children as

passive agents. This is best exemplified in Lamb and Peterson's (2012) identification of opposing understandings of girls' sexual empowerment.

### **2.3.3.2. *The commercialisation of childhood***

Children's re-entry into the economy as consumers in the last century has been a catalyst for fears over the 'commercialisation of childhood'. These concerns have generated a plethora of books on the damage that modern culture inflicts on children and the state of childhood. Titles such as, *Toxic Childhood: How The Modern World Is Damaging Our Children And What We Can Do About It* (Palmer, 2007); *Exploiting Childhood* (Wild, 2013); *The Spoilt Generation: Why Restoring Authority Will Make our Children and Society Happier* (Sigman, 2009) reveal concerns that modern childhood has been damaged by consumerism. In examining these texts Buckingham (2007) argues that parents are the target audience for rhetoric lamenting the changing nature of childhood and within this discourse children's voices are not accounted for. Children's position as consumers has, in similar ways to the discourse of sexualisation, been equated with a loss of innocence. Within the sexualisation of girls discourse inappropriate consumption is highlighted as a key site of concern but anxiety over the commercialisation of childhood is broader. Popular discourse concerning the commercialisation of childhood has a sense of urgency and campaigning groups have emerged demanding action, such as *Bye Buy Childhood* (2013) and *Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood* (2014).

Concerns over the commercialisation of childhood draw together two key themes in discourses of childhood. First, children are measured against an age related developmental model; within this framework there are clear codes for appropriate

and inappropriate consumption. Second, the risks from commercialisation are gendered. Perspectives on the commercialisation of childhood are polarized, with children either positioned as exploited by marketing forces or as savvy consumers who know what they want. As argued by Buckingham (2007) these seemingly contradictory positions have the same basis in understandings of childhood as innate.

### Children as exploited

Concerns with the commercialisation of childhood are not new (see for examples Cook, 2004 and Cross, 2010). Cross argues that 'throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much anti-consumption rhetoric was buried in the cult of the child' (2010: 20). Recently however these fears have intensified in social, cultural and political arenas. Buckingham (2007) argues that several factors have emerged to heighten concern over children's commercial exploitation: the scale of commercial culture, array of modes of media, targeted children's media and increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques. These concerns have been highlighted in high profile texts such as *Toxic Childhood* (Palmer, 2006), *No Logo* (Klein, 2009), *Born to Buy* (Schor, 2004) and reflected in media commentary and policy documents. Within this discourse children are constructed as passive victims of consumerism that exploits their natural vulnerability and harms their development as well as their physical and mental health. In her introduction to *Born to Buy* Schor (2004) notes the historical involvement of children in consumer culture however she goes on to argue that there have been two key changes to childhood that have made

commercialisation more harmful. First she argues that 'now, marketed leisure has replaced unstructured socialising, and most of what kids do revolves around commodities' (2004: 15). Furthermore 'children are growing up faster and ... are more integrated into adult spaces and activities and wield far more power in family decision making' (2004: 16). Schor argues that contemporary advertising has led to the transformation from children to consumers.

*Letting Children be Children* gives a detailed account of the concern over the commercialisation of childhood. In the review direct marketing to children is not in itself considered problematic, instead the concern is placed on the marketing of goods that for a variety of reasons are considered inappropriate for children's age (Bailey, 2011). Prevalent understandings of childhood as a series of stages based on age related developments are used to define what counts as 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate'. This process is often gendered where goods that are defined as inappropriate for girls are considered sexualised, as discussed in the previous section exploring the sexualisation of girls. In looking at the language used by Papadopoulos (2010) and Bailey (2011) in their respective reviews Buckingham's (1993) concern that children are positioned as passive consumers is strongly reflected. Both Papadopoulos and Bailey make recommendations that companies should restrain their marketing initiatives because, they argue, children are particularly vulnerable to advertising messages. Children are again presented as in need of adult protection and the commercial world is framed as threatening the existence of childhood. Tingstad and Buckingham argue that the discourse of the exploited child 'constructs the child as innocent, helpless, and unable to resist the



power of the media' (2010: 2). Furthermore, Hermes (2005) claims that there is a common assumption that children are instinctively drawn towards sensational and bad consumption practices. Tingstad and Buckingham (2010) note that this conception of children as powerless and of media as powerful follows a tradition of critical theory in which other people's consumption is an issue. Tingstad and Buckingham argue that it is 'largely white, male, middle class critics (who) have stigmatized the consumption practices of others - women, the working class and now children' (2010: 4).

### Children as empowered consumers

In direct contrast to the image of vulnerable children is the construction of the child as a knowing and empowered consumer. This discourse is often articulated from a marketing perspective, which positions the child as demanding and hard to please. A significant voice in this discourse of childhood and consumer culture is Lindstrom, whose book *Brandchild* (2004) explores 'the tween' as a consumer category. 'The tween' is discussed later in this chapter but in this section I outline Lindstrom's arguments for tweens as empowered consumers. Lindstrom remarks that tweens are the first generation 'that's been born and bred with an understanding of today's economic world. They play the stock market as if it's another version of a computer game. They talk about trading indices while they swap baseball or DragonBallZ cards, and they watch financial news as if it's an ongoing soap opera' (2004: 2). Tweens are presented as a consumer group that uses brands to express their identity and as the digital generation they require instant gratification. For

Lindstrom (2004) empowered tweens know what they want and how to get it.

Buckingham (2007) argues that the power being celebrated within this understanding of child consumers in the power to consume, a part of the Girl Power discourse discussed by Taft (2004). The empowered consumer narrative dovetails with the conception of the consumer based citizen. As Willett (2008) outlines, understandings of citizenship have been analysed as residing in the personal consumer choices individuals make within late modernity. Willet (2008) argues that this shift in citizenship embeds consuming (in order to better oneself) as the basis for citizenship and Harris (2008) argues girls are the ideal consumer citizens. Furthermore as explored by Riley, Griffin and Morey (2013) leisure and consumption practices are sites for the neoliberal consumer citizen, an argument reflected in the convergence of neoliberalism and postfeminism discussed previously in this chapter. Within this culture feminist gains are demonstrated through girls' ability to participate in consumer markets (Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005). The idea of children as empowered citizens through consumption has been part of academic discourse celebrating demonstrations of identity, resistance and creation. In fact Willett argues that 'mainstream culture becomes about maintaining a distinct cultural identity' (2008: 56).

In his analysis of the landscape of commercialisation concerns Buckingham (2007) argues that neither of these perspectives recognise that children may be both sophisticated readers of and influenced by consumer culture. Furthermore Willett (2008) calls for the debate to move beyond categorising children's media consumption as either dictated by a powerful consumer structure or as wholly of

their own choice. Buckingham (2007) goes on to argue that the debate is constrained by notions of childhood: on the one hand the natural state of childhood is corrupted by consumer culture whilst on the other children's needs as consumers are being met. Within both constructions of childhood children are in possession of something natural. The sexualisation of girls and the commercialisation of childhood are key discourses in the shaping of contemporary understandings and experiences of childhood and are important for contextualising tween culture.

### **2.4. Defining 'the tween' and tween culture**

There is some debate over the origin of the 'tween' however there is a general consensus that tweens are between childhood and adolescence. Cook and Kaiser (2004) note the use of 'subteen' or 'preteen' to describe white, middle class girls between the ages of 10 to 12 in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In tracing the development of the tween to the Second World War, Cook and Kaiser (2004) argue the tween was constructed as a distinctive space within the life course for the creation of a marketing and consumer category. The continued significance of consumer culture for tween culture and tween identity is discussed later in this section. Cook and Kaiser's (2004) explorations of the subteen reveal shared characteristics with contemporary articulations of the tween and public anxieties around them. The use of the terms tween, subteen or preteen position girls in relation to the teenager, when in fact the tensions of this age group arise out of the separate and distinct categories of child and teenager. While tween culture is often framed as a period of 'waiting to become' it also distances girls from their identity as a child and childhood culture. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh offer the following definition of the

tween as 'commonly understood to be a construction of the present day pertaining to a younger pre-adolescent and young adolescent age group exclusively or almost exclusively female, possessing, or as critics express it, defined by a distinct commodity culture (2005: 6). Aside from general definitions of tween girlhoods there have been attempts to discuss the basis of tweendom in biology, social or political spheres and within a distinctive cultural space as I now examine.

### The tween as a biological life stage

A biological basis for the tween as a separate and distinctive life stage is based in developmental discourses that are strongly bound by age. Seaton (2005) argues that children are measured against normative age related development more than any other age group. To the extent that childhood can be seen as a series of measurements, the completion of each stage advancing children on to the next, from infant to toddler, from tween to teen. Importantly different stages of child development correspond to expected behavior and access to particular public spaces. Furthermore Morrow (2013) argues that there are different conceptions of age, chronological, functional and relational, but the significance placed on chronological age is part of Western discourses of childhood that are produced through a scientific framework. Drawing on Foucault's ideas, Robinson and Davies (2008) suggest that this scientific paradigm constructs childhood as 'the natural order of things' and these ideas are taken as scientific truth. These privileged forms of knowledge then constitute the child and childhood within these knowledge boundaries.

Anxieties of tweens growing up too quickly draw on assumptions of the disruption of normative understandings of child development. These concerns are bolstered by scientific evidence that suggest girls experience the onset of puberty earlier than previous generations (Hermann-Giddens et al. 1997). Hermann-Giddens et al. concluded that their study had found that signs of early onset of puberty were occurring in girls who were younger than they expected. Their study used understandings of precocious sexual development as girls who were younger than 8 and found that girls, in particular African American girls, were beginning puberty at younger ages. The evidence presented in Hermann-Giddens et al.'s study of precocious sexuality was used to supported arguments that the sexualisation of girls had disrupted stages of normative development. Seaton argues that this results in girls' earlier entry into the 'social and temporal spaces of adult life – and therefore her entry into the complex social, political and economic relations of gender and sexuality' (2005: 29). Puberty is taken as the sign of the end of childhood and ushers an adult status on to girls with a set of expected behaviors and access to public space.

The evidence from Hermann-Giddens et al.'s study has been critiqued both from within the field of pediatrics and outside for not communicating all their evidence. For example Rosenfield et al. (2000) point to the early onset of pubescent signs in combination with the little change in the actual onset of menstruation and call for the slow pace of pubescent signs to be researched. In her critique of the precocious sexuality claims Seaton (2005) argued that girls who had shown signs of early onset of puberty reached the age of menstruation at the same time as their

counterparts. Therefore she concluded it would be more accurate to claim that puberty has been elongated from 18 months to three years. If beginning menstruation is seen as the moment a girl passes into adulthood, then the elongation of the time between the onset of puberty and reaching menstruation results in the lengthening of an in-between stage, having left childhood but not yet entered adolescence. Despite these criticisms widespread media commentary reporting the findings demonstrating girls' earlier onset of puberty resulted in public framing of tweens as experiencing something unnatural. The following headline from the Daily Mail demonstrates the representation of this discourse in media commentary; 'Tara was just seven when puberty struck – shockingly, cases like hers are becoming all too common – so what's to blame?' (Robinson, 2010). Precocious sexuality is viewed as an imposition of the adult world on the body of the child before she is developmentally ready. Scientific evidence of precocious sexuality is drawn on as part of broader anxieties about the loss of innocence and ultimately the death of childhood. The biological definition of the tween as a particular life stage gives weight to the 'hurried' child discourse that is now underpinned by scientific evidence.

### The tween as an economic and social life stage

In a move away from biological understandings some commentators have claimed that the tween is economically constructed. Tweens have been labeled the 'richest

generation' and their buying patterns revolving around non-essential, leisure, disposable and lifestyle products place them as integral to global economies (Harris, 2005 and Lindstrom, 2004). The tween's development within consumer culture and as a merchandising category has already been noted (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). Creating notions of the tween that are distinguished by age and gender position them as a consumer group that could be exploited economically. Cook underlines the significance of the consumer position for the tween as the following description from a merchandising manager in 1959 demonstrates;

'She spends as much as she can possibly beg, borrow or steal from her dazed parents. She loves to shop. All we need to do is expose this *Newteen* to the things she likes, and she is on our team – selling herself, her mother, and her pals... Our customer needs a feeling of security, of close friendships with contemporaries. She idolises the age group just above her and does not want to be confused with "those infants" who is anyone just a year younger' (Cook, 2004: 139 – 140).

There are striking similarities between this historical definition and the modern conception of the tween, most notably the aggressive association with consumer culture. In addition the importance of the tween as a life stage distinct from childhood and adolescence is also evident. Reflecting this description the tween could be defined by and through her participation in consumer markets. This

inverts the view that marketers developed the tween, but rather tween spending habits formed tween culture, supporting Lindstrom's (2004) idea of tweens as savvy, knowledgeable and able to demand their needs. The economic power of tweens has been discussed in terms of their own consumer choices and also their influence, or pester power, over larger family purchases (Buckingham, 2011). In terms of tween influence Tally (2004) argues that the success of Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys and N'Sync, are testament to the consumer power of tweens.

Other commentators argue that the tween arose out of changing social and political conditions. Coutler (2005) points to the Second Wave feminist movement and women's mass entry into the workplace as intrinsic for the creation of the tween. She argues that the 1980's saw a rise in latch – key kids who took over some of the responsibilities previously left to their mothers, for example undertaking food shopping, which meant that tweens had a larger influence over the family budget and were making brand decisions themselves. Whilst this sudden influence may have grabbed the attention of marketers it was their own consumer habits that led the tween to be identified as a key demographic. The accuracy of claims of 'pester power' have been disputed, Buckingham (2009) argues that it is difficult to quantify children's influence over larger family purchases. He suggests they may have relatively more influence over food, holidays, items for their own use, entertainment products and gifts for friends and family. However the conception of the tween as an individual with considerable commercial/ consumer power has taken hold of the industries' imagination, with books such as *The Great Tween Buying Machine* (Siegel, Coffey and Livingston, 2004) and *GenBuY* (Yarrow and



O'Donnell, 2009).

I have already outlined Coulter's (2005) analysis of the historical development of how femininity is demonstrated through consumption. Coulter (2005) argues that notions of tweens are produced within this framework so that the construction of the tween as girlie and a consumer reinforces the link between femininity and consumption. Mirroring the image of women the tween is seen as a passive consumer and easily manipulated by marketing. To summarise Coulter suggests, 'the stereotype of the tween girl is a voracious consumer who latches in to every new trend' (2005: 335). The tween is bound, first by her position as female and second as her position as a passive child consumer. In response to this position Coulter argues shopping gives girls a site in which they can articulate a certain degree of autonomy, consumer freedom and is connected with notions of adulthood. From these discourses of the tween it is notable that the ability to participate in the tween consumer culture is seen as important both through their own spending power and their (relative) influence over their parents' spending habits.

### Culture as definer

Driscoll (2005) proposes that tween may be defined as those who participate in a particular cultural space rather than an age defined stage. Reframing definitions of the tween as cultural increases flexibility in understandings of the tween as girls of any age who may pass through, remain in, return to or never enter this cultural

space. While tween culture makes its target audience as young girls very clear there is less certainty in knowing who consumes and participates in this culture. Buckingham's (2011) discussion on the divisive nature of both the child and youth consumer demographics is helpful here. In terms of gendered consumption he argues that the market is polarised and there is very little transgression. Therefore as tween culture is overtly marketed as a girl culture, the main consumers and participators in this culture are likely to be female. However Buckingham (2011) notes that age is a far less constricting factor in culture consumption and as such there is relative flexibility for older girls to consume tween culture. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2005) support this argument, as they suggest that teen and girl culture is extending its reaches to those who are 25 – 30. Participants in tween girl culture can therefore range from childhood to individuals in their 30's. These patterns of consumption support and reinforce Driscoll's (2005) idea that the tween may not be an age bound life stage between childhood and adolescence, as it has often been defined. Instead she suggests that the label tween may be attached to a space defined by consumption of tween culture. Within this framework age is not a defining characteristic of inclusion within the global tween culture but instead tween culture can be cast more generally as youthful. This persuasive argument explores the tween within the wider context of tween culture and therefore defined by cultural boundaries rather than outlined by particular age or developmental restrictions.

### Tween culture

Tally (2005) argues that the development of tween culture began in the late 1990's within the music industry; for example she discussed how Britney Spears and N'Sync were propelled to stardom after being carefully marketed to children. After this overnight success television quickly followed suit and tween time television was born. Tween cinema developed later, however Tally (2005) notes that this has expanded exponentially in recent years.

Tween culture presents itself as a globally available commodity, albeit one which largely originates from the United States. It is a global culture marked by gender and age, and presents itself as an up to date Girl Power movement. Harris (2005) describes tween culture as a point of convergence for youth, femininity and consumption, this nexus reflecting a similar place for postfeminism. Tween culture makes clear the audience, pre-teen girls, and is actively promoted as an international culture that is available to all girls. Harris (2005) argues that because of its global positioning tween culture does not produce local versions so a key characteristic of tween culture is global homogeneity. Tweens are positioned as 'interested in sexual appearance and sexual attractiveness, like to shop for themselves, and experience a public identity in shopping malls, the Internet and through images of girls like them in the media' (Harris, 2005: 210). This definition makes the consumer based citizenship of tween culture clear. Harris argues that as consumerism is the basis of tween identity, tween culture lends itself to and has become successful in a global consumer culture. The global expansion of tween culture means that girls experience a collective identity through their participation in tween cultural forms.

Harris (2005) identifies the two criteria for membership to tween culture, age and gender, both of which are specifically mentioned and promoted. Tween culture mirrors the teenybopper phenomenon analysed by McRobbie and Garber (1991) as it develops a public culture space distinctly marked for pre-teen girls. Age is promoted by locating tweens as having grown out of childhood but who are not yet ready for adolescence, tween culture is framed as a space that lends them a public identity. Gender is an even more pervasive aspect of tween culture; the global branding of tween culture as pink invokes particular ideas of gender. In addition to pink as a clear signifier of tween culture, Harris notes, is the use of 'fluffy, glittery, sparkle and shimmery objects and fashions, and the use of words like "princess" "fairy" and of course "girl"' (2005: 212). The use of language and the ways the culture is presented, most strikingly in colour, marks tween culture out as distinctly girly and young. While tween culture is articulated as inclusive, global and Girl Power driven, it is highly fractured. Exploring tween culture beyond this representation it is clear that both class and cultural privilege are driving forces for inclusion and participation within this culture (Harris, 2005).

However biological and cultural identifications of the tween are not exclusive and the production of tween culture highlights characteristics of a biological age based notions. Tween culture makes assumptions about development stages of childhood and is designed to meet those biologically framed needs. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2005) found in their observations of tween cultural artefacts that there was interplay between 'wanting to grow up' and become part of teenage culture and wanting to remain in the safe space of childhood play.

### Tween identity

Brookes and Kelly argue that 'the tweenie self can be understood as being, to a significant extent, an artefact of consumption' (2009: 600). They argue that tweens are born into consumer culture and understand how the resources they purchase can inform and construct their identities. These commodities are symbolic of tween culture and form a heteronormative hegemonic femininity (Harris, 2005). The idea that the tween is an 'artefact of consumption' is heavily reflected in representations in popular culture of tweens. Exploring depictions of tweens through an analysis of tween magazine *Dolly*, Brookes and Kelly argue the tween self is created in and of consumerism; this representation promises that through these artefacts tweens can be fit, healthy, attractive and desirable.

Moreover Coulter (2005) argues that girls' awareness of puberty was not signified by the physical changes that were happening to their bodies but their participation within consumer culture as a result of these changes. She gives the example of the development of breasts that requires girls to buy bras, a consumer experience. Reaching puberty is articulated within a consumption narrative, where the individual experiences puberty as a consumer. Across the definitions I discussed the tween, whether considered as based in biological development or within socio – political arenas, is demonstrated through consumerism.

### **2.5.Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined a number of key discourses in the construction of contemporary childhood and girlhood, bringing them together to explore tween culture, the focus of this thesis. I have outlined the theoretical framework used in this thesis, drawing on discourses of Romantic childhood and postfeminist and neoliberal articulations of contemporary girlhood.

In this chapter I have discussed the historical development of childhood and paid particular attention to the construction of the Romantic childhood. This historical context is important in understanding the contemporary construction of childhood 'innocence' as well as in the lamentations over the 'death of childhood'. I have shown how the construction of boundaries between childhood and adulthood embed childhood with particular values that are threatened from a number of fronts. I examined two of these discourses, the sexualisation of girls and the commercialisation of childhood. In exploring these moral anxieties around contemporary girlhood I have paid attention to the way boundaries between adulthood and childhood are perceived as having been eroded through sex. In later analytical chapters in this thesis I go on to discuss the governance of the values of childhood set out in this section, within tween culture.

Remaining with the contemporary focus the chapter moved on to explore postfeminism and neoliberalism as two intersecting frameworks shaping articulations of girlhood. I focused on consumerism and youthfulness as two significant arenas of overlap between these discourses and tween culture. Harris' analysis of the 'can do' girl and the 'at risk' girl conceptualise the opportunities and risks embodied by girls within these frameworks.

Within the contexts discussed above the final section of this chapter examined the tween and tween culture. I outlined a number of approaches to defining the tween, arguing that exploring tweens through culture enables flexibility for girlhood consumption practices that are not necessarily structured by age. I discussed how consumer culture has had a central role in the historical development of tween culture and the implications of this for tween identity.

This chapter has drawn from two key interlinking fields that this thesis contributes too, childhood and girlhood. The analytic discussion in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 in this thesis speaks to these significant fields in order to contextualise and understand the articulation of tween culture on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. I turn to an exploration of childhoods and girlhoods online in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 3. Digital childhoods and digital girlhoods**

### **3.1.Introduction**

This chapter is thematically structured around children's digital cultures reflecting the location of this thesis within virtual spaces and at the intersection of digital culture and girlhood. The discussion continues two key themes through from the previous chapter; discourses of childhood and girls' cultural consumption and explores them in the light of digital spaces.

The chapter begins with a discussion of three key discourses through which children are constituted online, the technologisation of childhood, 'at risk' and digital natives. I argue that there are similar assumptions about the nature of childhood in each of these discourses. I go on to map children's use of the Internet, looking in particular at age, class and gender. I focus on presenting an overview of work exploring gender differentiation in behaviour and emerging research examining gendered spaces online, as this is the focus of my research.

### **3.2.Digital culture and childhood**

It is not surprising given the Internet's exponential growth that the lives of the digital generation have emerged as a distinctive research topic (Facer et al., 2004). Olafsson et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis of the digital childhoods field revealed the majority of research on children's online activities is weighted around 15 year olds, reflecting the increased use of the Internet within this age group. Buckingham



argues that, 'children spend more time with media of various kinds than they do on any other activity apart from sleeping' (2007: 75), and the Internet is becoming a major source of media for young people, with children in the UK spending 12 hours a week online at home (Ofcom, 2013). The UK policy framework for children online is based on *Safer Children in a Digital World* (Byron, 2008), a report commissioned by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The report explored 'harmful and inappropriate material on the Internet and video games' (2008: 5). Byron argued for an approach that empowers young people to be able to keep themselves safe. As part of the remit the report set up the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (2008). *Click Clever Click Safe* (2010) was the UK's first strategy for child safety online that looked at ways to support parents and children to be safer in online environments.

Children's relationships to media have been considered a source of concern and celebration and these understandings have shaped broader discourses of childhood. In the next section I explore three competing discourses framing children's relationship to digital cultures; the technologisation of childhood, digital natives and children at risk. Despite their differences these discourses come together to communicate the contradictory and complex articulation of childhood online.

### **3.2.1. Technologisation of childhood**

The increasing range and uses for media that are available to children has raised concerns over the way childhood is being reconstituted by technology. The technologisation of childhood discourse articulates concerns for children's use of

technology because of the perceived detrimental impact in terms of their social, cognitive and emotional development. Whilst the 'technologisation of childhood' concerns are not new there has been an intensification of these anxieties with children's increasing use of the Internet. These anxieties have been drawn on in media commentary on childhood demonstrated in the following headlines; 'Generation of iPad children who cannot hold a pencil: Playing with touch-screen devices means youngsters are struggling to learn basic motor skills' (Harris, 2013) and 'Children's health threatened by increasing screen time' (Boseley, 2012).

Children's use of technology is a focus for anxieties over the changing nature of childhood. In Chapter 2 I drew on three notable authors in the articulating concerns for the death of childhood, Postman (1994), Elkind (2001) and Palmer (2007). I discussed how their anxieties for the state of contemporary childhood are based on notions of a Romantic childhood, which is a period separated from adulthood and inscribed with values of vulnerability and innocence. Within the death of childhood rhetoric technology is positioned as threatening to the nature of childhood by undermining this distinct separation by bringing children into an adult world (Plowman, McPake and Stephen, 2010). Postman's (1994) fears for the potential corrupting effect of television on childhood can be seen replicated in later articulations of the death of childhood discourse, notably by Elkind (2001) and Palmer (2006). Both of these more recent authors focus on the Internet as a site through which anxieties around children's use of technology are amplified. Both Elkind and Palmer contend that the Internet is an unregulated space in which children can consume inappropriate content and engage in risky communication.

Claims made within the concerns for the 'technologisation of childhood' rest on the perception of a fundamental incompatibility between technology and childhood. This rhetoric of childhood draws on nostalgia for a simpler time for children and reveals an underlying concern that childhood has been reconstituted in light of these changes. Dixon and Weber suggest that this nostalgia for childhood is a 'collective looking back, possibly as an apprehensive response to a rapidly changing environment' (2007: 17), highlighting the intensification of these anxieties within digital technologies and spaces.

Anxieties over the technologisation of childhood are, as Plowman et al. (2010) point out, at odds with increasing calls to embed technology within education and with the emphasis on reducing the digital divide. However they note that concerns with the technologisation of childhood have gained more traction within media commentary. The articulation of these concerns reveal fears of cultural change and affords children little agency, replicating the structure of different anxieties over childhood and girlhood that I discussed in Chapter 2. I explore the way that these concerns are gendered later in this chapter. I now turn to explore the second discourse shaping articulations of digital childhood, children at risk online.

### **3.2.2. Children 'at risk' online**

Children's use of the Internet has been a source of public concern and these anxieties have been key in articulating digital childhood. Media commentary reports a range of risks to children online from cyberbullying and paedophilia to physical and mental health impacts. The 'at risk' discourse positions the Internet as

potentially corrupting for children's development. Holloway and Valentine (2003) argue that within these concerns children are viewed as misplaced in an adult online world and at risk because they do not belong. This positioning of children in relation to adults has similarities to the broader technologisation of childhood discourse discussed above where the boundaries of childhood and adulthood are perceived to be blurred.

Children's exposure to online risks has been central to work within a digital childhood fields. A significant study for understanding risk is the EU Kids Online project (2010) that explored how children in different European countries used the Internet, and how 'risky' their behaviour online was. The project categorised children's Internet use in the UK as 'high use, some risk', which demonstrates progression on their previous classification as 'high use, high risk'. Haddon and Livingstone (2012) point to the policy implications of the Byron review (2008) and the establishment of the UK Council for Child Safety for this perceived reduction in risk.

Livingstone and Haddon (2008) classify online risk into four categories; content, contact, commercial and privacy. Content risks include exposure to illegal or harmful content; contact risks are concerned with the interactivity of online spaces such as children's potential contact with strangers or cyber bullying; commercial risks are defined as advertising, commercial exploitation, gambling or illegal downloading; finally privacy risks are associated with giving out personal information or an invasion of privacy. In addition Staksrud and Livingstone (2009) identify conduct risks, where children contribute to risky content or contact, for

example by 'sexting' (for a further discussion of this see Ringrose et al., 2012). In mapping instances of risk the EU Kids Online (2009) project found that content risks were the most common risk for children to encounter online. Contact risks, a prominent aspect of media commentary, were variable with experience of cyber bullying frequent but contact with strangers less likely. The EU Kids Online project concluded that children were most likely to encounter pornography online followed by violent images and bullying, I discuss the way that concern for and exposure to these risks is gendered later in this chapter. In Livingstone and Haddon's (2009) overview of research undertaken on children's online risk they note two developments. First most research looks at content risks and there is relatively little done on commercial risks. Second many of these studies seek to quantify risks rather than asking how and why children perceive them. Livingstone and Haddon argue that this focus feeds into a moral panic where children's voices are left out. In this thesis I explore how girls understand, negotiate and manage a range of risks online presenting a distinctive understanding of girls and risk online.

Alongside research seeking to quantify the risks children encounter online researchers have investigated how children manage these risks. Ofcom (2013) surveyed children's responses to risky behaviour online and found that the majority of children aged 8 - 11 engaged in some action to manage this risk, most commonly reporting to a family member when they came across content that concerned them. In Ofcom's survey very few children, around 3%, reported that they would not tell anyone. Complicating the discussion on risk Pedersen (2013) found that children's understanding of online risk and their behavior in mitigating risks were

gendered, for example more girls than boys in the study described themselves as selective in who they are friends with online. Pedersen concluded that this gendered behavior was the result of targeted risk aversion education and techniques to girls. Similarly Staksrud and Livingstone (2009) found teenagers and boys were less likely to pay attention to safety messages. Within this emerging field research indicates studies looking at children's understandings of risk indicate that children have some resilience to online risks but that this is shaped by gender.

Complicating the boundaries of risk Livingstone and Haddon (2007) argue that there is not a clear division between risk and opportunity for children online and they identify three reasons for this. First differences between child and adult perspectives on activities mean that while children may perceive their activities as opportunities, adults may define them as risky, such as intimacy online, downloading music, sharing information or making friends. Second the boundaries of online risks are blurred, for example when does the posting of an image become pornography? Third the design of online spaces does not distinguish between topics, such as sexual advice and pornography.

### Gendered risks

In this section I explore how risk is gendered concentrating on the articulation of online risk for girls reflecting the focus of this thesis. In their historical analysis of the impact of technology Cassell and Cramer (2008) argue that anxieties around the use of technology have often been gendered. Investigating concerns arising out of

the introduction of the telegraph and later the telephone they argue that there are two key similarities. First a public concern over girls' potential immoral behavior though the use of these technologies. Second access to these technologies threatened parental control of young girls. Cassell and Cramer (2008) concluded that when discussed in relation to young girls a positive discourse that celebrates the potential opportunities of new technological advances quickly became refocused on the inherent risk of girls' use of technology.

Gendered concerns over technology frame discussions of children's use of online spaces (BECTA, 2008). The gendering of online risks positions girls as primarily at risk from contact risks such as pedophiles and cyber bullying, whilst boys are viewed as at risk from content risks, such as pornography or violence. Headlines such as 'Millions of girls using Facebook, Bebo and Myspace 'at risk' from pedophiles and bullies' (Revoir, 2008) and 'Porn affects ability of boys to form relationships' (Marshall, 2014) characterise these gendered concerns. The gendered division of online risks reflects and draws on broader gendered concerns for boys and girls, for example anxieties over girls' use of technology converge with sexualisation fears. Within this gendered risk discourse the focus on contact risks replicates and amplifies recurrent concerns that girls are being prematurely sexualised. Furthermore these fears are amplified online due to the perceived lack of adult regulation and monitoring (Bailey, 2011).

Livingstone (2008) argues that social networking sites (SNS) are the focus of moral panics over the risky nature of online spaces for girls. Particular SNS have become framed as risky spaces for girls because of contact risks and have been the location

of heightened public and political concern. These anxieties range from time wasting and socially isolating to viewing them as spaces for lurking paedophiles. Pointing out the range of potential risks the Home Office (2010) lists the following risks associated with social networking sites: bullying, harassment, exposure to harmful content, theft of personal information, sexual grooming, violent behaviour, encouragement to self-harm and racism.

In public concern and media commentary there has been particular focus on the potential for girls to be sexually solicited online. Underlining the inherently risky nature of interaction online for girls is the often quoted statistic that one in five children has been sexually solicited online (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Wolak, 2001). The narrative of social networking sites as locations for paedophiles is prominently drawn on in media commentary. The use of this rhetoric has been explored in a number of studies deconstructing the media response to Sarah Payne's murder and the use of the discourse of paedophilia in the coverage (Critcher, 2002 and Hier, 2008). Analysing the way that discourses of risk invoke the figure of the online sexual predator boyd (2014) argues that it enforces the misguided belief that strangers are most likely to be perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Furthermore in her analysis boyd (2014) critiques the Crimes Against Children Research Center's claim that one in five children have experienced sexual solicitation online as inaccurate. First, she argues that they surveyed young people about 'sexual solicitation', which was defined as a range of activities from flirting to sexual harassment. Second, re examining their findings and categorizing the data by age boyd found that only 4% of 'sexual solicitations' came from individuals over 25,



while 76% came from other minors. Furthermore the statistic comes from the first survey undertaken in 1999 by the Center and is therefore dated. The effect of gendering risk in this manner is significant for girls because they are cast as victims and are rarely given a voice in the articulation of moral concerns over their use of the Internet. Cassell and Cramer (2008) argue that this has impacted girls' participation in digital spaces because they are seen as in need of protection from cybercrimes and technology itself. Whereas boys are positioned as at risk from content risks, primarily pornography, which is normalized within developmental narratives and potential risk it carries is mitigated.

In this section I have given an overview of how children are constructed within discourses of risk online, exploring how risks have been categorised and I have mentioned a number of key studies that have investigated how children understand and mitigate risks. I then focused on how discourses and experiences of online risk and risk mitigation are gendered. As I have discussed above research has aimed to quantify the risks that children encounter online but a qualitative exploration of girls' understandings of gendered risks is absent from this emerging research field. I now turn to the third discourse in the articulation of 'digital childhoods', digital natives.

### **3.2.3. Digital Natives**

In comparison to the threats to childhood articulated through the technologisation of childhood and the risk narrative, the notion of the 'digital generation' communicates positive opportunities for children in online space. Children who

have grown up with accessibility to the Internet have been described as 'digital natives' or as forming a 'digital generation'. Facer (2014) explores the development and proliferation of the idea of the 'digital native' through the late 1990's. Analysing the exponential rise in sales of home computers Facer argues that children were positioned as having a natural, innate understanding of technology and they were educationally disadvantaged by not having access to new technologies. Furthermore children's increased immersion within a media saturated world has led to the labeling of them as a digital generation. Buckingham defines the digital generation as 'a generation defined in and through its experience of digital computer technology' (2006: 1). The use of technology in making this distinction between children and their parents led to discussions of a growing digital divide structured along generational lines, as evidenced in the follow extract from Barlow's Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,

'you are terrified of your own children, since they are natives in a world where you will always be immigrants. Because you fear them you entrust your bureaucracies with the parental responsibilities you are too cowardly to confront yourselves' (Barlow, 1996).

The division of children as natives and their parents as immigrants in the virtual world, as exemplified in Barlow's quote, homogenises generational experiences and reinforces the rhetoric of the digital generation. Taspott's (1998) work on the

digital generation raises a series of dichotomies that are produced by technology and define the 'Baby Boomer' and the 'Net Generation'. According to Tapscott each generation has been shaped by their relationship to their respective generational technology, television for the Baby Boomers and Internet for the Net Generation. Tapscott argues that Baby Boomers are defined by their relationship to television, which he claims is a passive form of media. As such the Baby Boomers are characterised as conservative, hierarchical and inflexible. On the other hand the members of the Net Generation are 'hungry for expression, discovery and their own self development' (1998: 5) because they are defined by their relationship to the Internet, an interactive form of media. However Tapscott's claims for generational divides based on technology have been criticised for lacking in theoretical rigor (Jones, 2011), as based on technological determinism (Buckingham, 2013) and as over simplistic (Bayne and Ross, 2011). The discourse of 'digital natives' or 'digital generation' homogenises young people and ignores the intersections of privilege that mean some children can perform as 'natives' to digital culture (Holmes, 2011). Furthermore boyd argues that 'the rhetoric of 'digital natives' far from being useful is often a distraction to understanding the challenges that youth face in a networked world' (2014: 176).

Despite academic criticism of the concepts of the 'digital generation' and 'digital natives' these terms are frequently used to describe young people, particularly in media commentary, as exemplified in the following headline, 'Are you baffled by technology? Ask a six-year-old: They know more than 45- year-olds' (Glennie, 2014). These fears are not new, as Buckingham (2013) argues concerns with

younger generations are based on perceptions of social change and anxieties over a loss of continuity. However the current fears of a generation gap links these anxieties to technology.

#### **3.2.4. Conclusion: digital childhoods**

The three discourses I have explored converge in shaping notions of digital childhoods and digital girlhoods. These discourses are contradictory, on the one hand the articulation of digital childhood is characterised by risk, or as inherently threatening the nature of childhood. Whilst on the other children, are cast as natives in the virtual world and able to take advantages of new opportunities. However these three key discourses reveal similar underlying assumptions about children and childhood. First each of the discourses examined reinforce the construction of childhood and adulthood as separate and exclusive spheres. In the previous section I outlined two discourses where digital technologies are seen as the preserve of adults and a space in which children are misplaced and childhood is at risk. In contradiction the final discourse, 'digital natives' constructs digital children as instinctively part of the digital world they were born into. Second the positioning of children as 'at risk' or 'digital natives' and as childhood as threatened exposes a deterministic relationship between children and technology. This homogenises understandings of childhood in the digital age and ignores underlying structures that construct experiences for children. Finally Holloway and Valentine (2003) argue that understandings of children as at risk and as digital natives embed technological ability in biological age stages. This claim can also be applied to concerns for the technologisation of childhood where technology, as part of

adulthood is imposed on children who are too young to understand the implications. In this section I have outlined and considered three key discourses in the construction of digital childhood and digital girlhood. In the next section I present an overview of research mapping how children use the Internet.

### **3.3.Mapping children's use of the Internet**

The intersection of gender, class, ethnicity and geographical location in structuring children's access online has been discussed as creating a digital divide (Katz and Rice, 2002, Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). This section gives a broad overview of children's use of the Internet and how age and class differentiate this use. I discuss the gendering of access and experiences online in the following section.

Research undertaken by Ofcom (2013) and the EU Kids Online Project (Haddon and Livingstone, 2012) maps the landscape of children's use of the Internet. In comparison to the rest of the EU, children in the UK go online more and at younger ages than their European counterparts (Haddon and Livingstone, 2012). Ofcom's (2013) longitudinal research demonstrates the general pattern of increased use of the Internet by children from 2007 to 2013. The project found that the majority of children accessed the Internet through a PC, laptop or netbook, although they noted the increasing use of tablets and mobiles as sites for access. Their findings indicate that children's use of the Internet is defined by age. The Internet is the second site for media activities for children aged 12 – 15, just behind watching television. However it is below playing computer or video games and watching DVDs on television for the 5 – 7 age group. The number of hours children spent

online was again marked by age distinctions with children aged 5 – 7 going online for 6.7 hours per week, children 8 – 11 spending 9.2 hours online and finally children aged 12 – 15 spending 17 hours on the Internet (Ofcom, 2013). Furthermore Ofcom's (2013) research demonstrates an age division in activities undertaken online. Older children, those in the 8 – 11 and 12 – 15 categories, were more likely to use the Internet for school work, whereas younger children were more likely to use the Internet for playing games. In a review of literature the EU Kids Online Project (2010) identifies three key online positive opportunities for children aged 0 – 8: academic achievement; digital literacy, digital social skills and digital citizenship; and play and social interaction.

The impact of children's social class on their access to and use of the Internet has been a focus for research (see for example Ofcom, 2013 and Livingstone, 2003). Livingstone (2003) argued that these inequalities are largely based on socioeconomic factors. However, these studies have revealed a complicated picture of access. Research by Ofcom (2013) found a class division in the location of children's access, with children in socio-economic classes DE likely to have access solely at school. In addition Livingstone (2003) found that parents' experiences online impacted on the frequency of children's use of the Internet. Concerns that socio – economic factors structure access overlap with discussions of digital spaces for learning, with a number of key studies exploring the potential educational impact of access online (see for example Boonaert and Vettenburg, 2011, and Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008). These pieces of research highlight the way that these opportunities online reinforce social inequalities for those who cannot participate. Livingstone and Helsper (2007)

argue that there has been little research done on why some children do not use the Internet because labeling them as the digital generation homogenises experiences and hides structural inequalities.

### **3.4.Digital girlhood studies**

Research focus has moved away from examining a gender divide in access and time spent online, as this is now relatively similar. Instead gender differentiation in terms of behaviour and activities online has become a key topic for investigation. Weber and Dixon (2007) note the generalisation of studies that were undertaken with boys or on boys' spaces and have then been used to inform ideas of all children online. They call for a focus on girls and girl culture to bridge this gap and this thesis contributes to the emerging field of digital girlhood. The metaphor of the 'virtual bedroom' has become a popular way of conceptualising girls' spaces and activities online; the use of the term has clear reference to McRobbie and Garber's (1976) work on girls' bedroom culture. Using this concept Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) argue that exploring digital spaces as girls' virtual bedrooms enables the private and personal nature of these interactions to be communicated. However in interrogating the concept of the virtual bedroom Barker (2011) argues that girls' use of the Internet is not always private and is subject to regulation and surveillance.

Online spaces are transformative in particular ways for girls as Harris suggests that the home, if not the bedroom, is an important site for girls' leisure time: 'As young women are so often confined to the home, the Internet has become an important

public forum for connecting with others' (2004: 156). Research examining gender differentiation online indicates that children engage in distinctive gendered behaviours, these studies tend to suggest that girls use the Internet for communication with friends and for participation in celebrity culture more than boys (Cassell and Cramer, 2008, BECTA, 2008 and Barker, 2011). A growing field of research has investigated gendered spaces and activities online. Girls' identity construction and play has been a significant aspect to this work examining the development of identity through blogging (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008), social networking sites (Ringrose, 2010) and chat rooms (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie, 2006), other key topics of research include girls' friendships (Bourdreau, 2007) and community development (Polak, 2007). Despite research indicating that girls utilise online spaces as sites for their consumption of celebrity culture it has not yet been addressed within the emerging field of literature, a significant gap that this project contributes to filling. While there are a variety of websites used by and explicitly designed for children the literature I now focus on work examining commercial and tween sites in order to contextualise the online spaces I explore in this thesis.

### **3.4.1. Commercial tween spaces online**

Many tween websites, including *Stardoll*, are commercial and these spaces are often framed as exploitative because they are perceived to be imposing themselves on childhood play. In doing so children's commercial websites sit at the nexus of concerns about the commercialisation of childhood, discussed in the previous chapter, and the technologisation of childhood outlined in this chapter. Within online spaces children's play is considered threatened by commercial interests. The



contrast between traditional notions of children's play and digitally mediated play is created through a sense of public nostalgia that combines and reinforces concerns for the commercialisation and technologisation of childhood.

Children's commercial spaces online have been discussed as exploitative forms of media in a number of ways. First, the commercialisation of digital childhood and online play has amplified fears over the effect of commercial interests on children. These concerns are intensified because of the pervasiveness of commercialisation within virtual spaces and have often been focused around new marketing techniques such as 'like' buttons and advergames as well the growth of advertising online. In *Letting Children be Children* Bailey (2011) raised these concerns, arguing that it is hard for children to distinguish between advertising and content online. Furthermore Buckingham (2007) notes that often offers of free play or spaces that host user-generated content collect data on children and use it to refine lucrative targeted advertising. Children have become a profitable demographic and central to commercial interests online (Grimes and Shade, 2005). Within these concerns commercial websites are viewed as manipulating children's natural desire to play and taking advantage of their innate innocence and vulnerability, key traits linked to Romantic discourses of childhood outlined in Chapter 2. Second, commercial spaces are seen as exploitative because children do not own their user-generated content created on these sites. In Grimes and Shade's (2005) research on the commercial website NeoPets, they unpicked claims that the site was a space for children's participation. They argue that because the site claims intellectual property rights on children's content it undermined claims that children are

contributors to the site. They concluded that the commercialisation of children's play online denies children agency in the creation of their own cultural spaces.

However Reid-Walsh (2007) notes that children themselves view commercial websites as spaces for free play online. Viewing these opportunities as inherently exploitative denies children agency and choice in their cultural practices. In a similar way to the commercialisation of childhood discourse outlined in the previous chapter, understandings of commercial websites need to take into consideration how children may use these spaces and to what extent they can negotiate them.

#### **3.4.2. Defining age specific and gendered spaces online**

Children's websites draw on characteristics defining children, tweens and teens as separate and distinctive life stages and this positioning is reflected in the design and functions of their respective websites. For example Willett argues that tween websites 'construct their audience in different ways: as vulnerable, sexual, potentially powerful, curious, in need of guidance and having their own valid popular culture' (2005: 283). This is in keeping with the construction of tweens as residing in between two stages of development, childhood and adolescence. Tween spaces online are recognisable through colour, language choices and images (Willett, 2009) that reflect Harris' (2005) observations of offline tween culture outlined in the previous chapter. The centrality of consumer culture to these web spaces reinforces their tween positioning. Reid-Mitchell (2007) argues that girls are cast as 'trendy consumers' mirroring Brookes and Kelly's claim that the tween is an

‘artefact of consumption’ (2009: 600).

Age is purposefully constructed online so that websites are read as age appropriate. Willett (2009) argues that the design and structure of websites separate spaces for children, tweens and teens. She argues that while children’s sites tend to focus on age appropriate offline popular culture, tween sites have strong gaming and interactivity elements. These activities are further separated from sites intended for teens through their content and design. Websites aimed at tweens have computer-generated avatars, rather than on a teen site users can upload their own images. The girls in Willett’s study who called these ‘safe’ chat rooms understood this distinction. Willett argues that the structure and design of tween and teen sites make subtle distinctions in age. The age appropriate design of websites reflects general patterns of Internet use amongst children as those between 5 and 11 years old use avatar websites but this significantly decreases as children grow up and the use of SNS increases (Ofcom, 2013). Another aspect of this is the creation of age barriers, for example the minimum age to sign up for a SNS account is generally set at 13 years old. However pre-teen membership of these sites is prolific, with 47% of 10 to 12 year old Internet users signed up (Ofcom, 2011), suggesting that these are not an effective way of designating age appropriate spaces.

In her discussion of age online, Reid-Walsh (2007) explored a number of websites for girls and argues that they are constructed to form a reading pathway. This design enables girls to progress in age from *Polly Pockets* through to *Barbie* and *Bratz* and on to teenage websites such as *Flava*. However she notes that while this

may be the intended reading path research demonstrates that girls tend to move back and forth between age bound websites. Research has suggested girls may 'read up' (Willett, 2005), or 'read down' and as Reid- Walsh (2007) suggests they may be engage in nostalgic play and escape teenage stress by returning to sites they used to use. Furthermore girls may use a combination of sites that include reading up and down (Reid –Walsh, 2007), reflecting girls' offline consumption patterns discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore while sites may be designed with age appropriate ideas they are not necessarily used or viewed by children in this way. Using data collected by the EU kids Project, Livingstone (2014) notes that age barriers are ineffective; instead children's activities on social networking sites are constrained by their digital literacy and the design of the sites.

Examining tween culture online Willett's (2007) research on paperdoll websites, where users dress up virtual dolls, is a significant piece in the emerging analysis of girls' culture online. Paperdoll websites are a clear example of the virtual manifestation of traditional offline girls' culture, discussed by Reid – Mitchell (2007) who notes the resemblances of girls' online and offline activities. Furthermore Willett (2007) notes the situating of these sites of girls' digital play in private or consumer landscapes, such as homes and shopping centres, reflecting gendered spaces offline. The contradictory situating of tween girls as between childhood and postfeminist adolescence is replicated in paperdoll sites, where Willett (2007) argues there is a tension between viewing girls as victims of an exploitative fashion industry and as empowered through their consumption practices. The concerns about girls' use of paperdoll sites reflect broader anxieties of tweendom explored in

the previous chapter, characterised by Harris' (2004) 'at risk' and 'can do' girls.

### **3.5.Conclusion**

In this chapter I outlined and discussed three key discourses constructing notions of digital childhoods and digital girlhoods; technologisation of childhood, children 'at risk' and 'digital natives'. In a similar way to the polarisation of voices in the commercialisation of childhood debates concerns around children's use of digital technologies was underpinned by two discourses. On one hand are discourses of the digitally competent child whose needs as part of the digital generation are met through technology. On the other the Internet is understood as a 'Wild West' where children's status is no different from adults' (Facer, 2014). Drawing the three discourses together I argue that they articulate similar underpinning assumptions about the nature of childhood. First, they reinforce the separation of adulthood and childhood as two distinct arenas; second, they reveal a deterministic understanding of children's relationship to technology; and third, they link children's (in)ability with technology to biological age. Moving on from discursive representations of digital childhood I outlined children's use of the Internet. I discussed how access to and activities undertaken on the Internet is structured by class, age and gender.

In the latter part of the chapter I explored the emerging work examining digital girlhood with a focus on gender-differentiated behavior and gendered spaces online. I then concentrated on commercial tween websites. I argued that girls' cultures need to be investigated as part of digital childhood, and in particular

### Chapter 3 - Digital childhoods and digital girlhoods

research examining girls' consumption of celebrity culture is notably absent. I continue this discussion in the following chapter where I explore girls' fandom practices as part of the case studies chosen for this project. As I discussed in this chapter research exploring girls' online spaces is emerging and there needs to be a focus on understanding how girls use and negotiate commercial websites.

## **Chapter 4. Introduction to case studies: *Stardoll*, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* and Miley Cyrus**

### **4.1.Introduction**

This chapter has two main purposes, first the chapter outlines the three interconnected case studies within this thesis. I present a description of the two websites data was collected from, *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. I then go on to give a concise overview of Miley Cyrus as a focused case study within celebrity culture on *Stardoll*. The discussion in this chapter contextualises the methodological dialogue in the next chapter as well as presenting an overview of the sites of research for the analytical chapters. Second, the chapter provides an overview of girls' fandom literatures, which contextualise the celebrity and fandom focus of this research. Building on the literature discussed in the previous chapters I discuss the development of academic research on girls' fandom and the emerging considerations of how fandom practices may be transformed within digital spaces. I argue that online spaces may have particular functions for tween fandom as a global culture.

### **4.2.*Stardoll*: 'fame, fashion and friends'**

In this section I present an overview of *Stardoll*, the primary case study for this research. *Stardoll* was created in Finland in 2004 and was launched as paperdollhaven.com by Liisa Wrang who drew a series of dolls and their clothing for members to play with. The website was re-launched in 2006 as stardoll.com, after

funding from two American venture capital firms, Sequoia Capital and Index Ventures. The current CEO of *Stardoll* is Mattia Milksche, who also co-owns the Posh Media Group, the corporate offices are located in Sweden. The site attracts users globally and at the time of the study has 3 million members worldwide from 200 countries (Stardoll, 2014). *Stardoll* claims to be, 'one of the biggest and safest sites for girls on the Internet' (Stardoll, 2012) and according to their research the space is predominantly used by young girls (Stardoll, 2012).

The basis of *Stardoll* is illustrated in their choice of a computer – generated paperdoll avatar, which can be customised by members. The original premise of *Stardoll* was a virtual paperdoll dressing up site and this is still central to play in the space, although the range activities on offer have expanded. *Stardoll's* tagline 'fashion, friends and fame' (2012) sum up the key interest areas of the site. These can be generally classified as the consumption and production of clothing, the site's functions as a SNS and featuring celebrity culture.

*Stardoll* is a commercial website run on their own currency 'Stardollars', that can either be brought or earned. There are two types of account, 'Non Superstar', where members can play for free and 'Superstar', which incurs a monthly charge. The currency of the website is Stardollars and the number of Stardollars a member can exchange for currencies such as pounds sterling is changeable.

Members can sign up for Superstar membership from £4.95 per month and receive 200 Stardollars each month, this is approximately 2.5p per Stardollar. It is difficult to quantify the exact cost of items as there are many different kinds of items available to members to purchase on the site. However there is a distinction



between branded and non branded good in general cost of items. A limited edition dress may cost between 150 and 190 Stardollars. At the exchange rate detailed above this would cost £4.75. However where items do not have limited stock the price is lower, for example a dress may cost 26 Stardollars, which would cost 65p. In addition to purchasing power a Superstar membership allows girls more interaction on the site for example they can access clubs, create and buy their own clothes, sell their items to other members.

Playing with a Non Superstar account requires members to earn (a limited number of) Stardollars in order to buy many of the items on the site and gain experience by spending time on the site completing tasks to access interactive functions. Non Superstars can earn Stardollars by undertaking activities outlined on the 'Daily Task List'. These include participating in partner sites, promoting *Stardoll* outside of the site, watching partner videos or taking part in surveys. For example 'liking' the Stardoll Facebook page earns a member 5 Stardollars or downloading the Stardoll Access App earns a member 10 Stardollars. The amount of Stardollars available for members to earn in these ways offers small financial benefits, for example whilst liking the Stardoll Facebook page earns a member 5 Stardollars a dress may cost between 150 and 190 Stardollars.

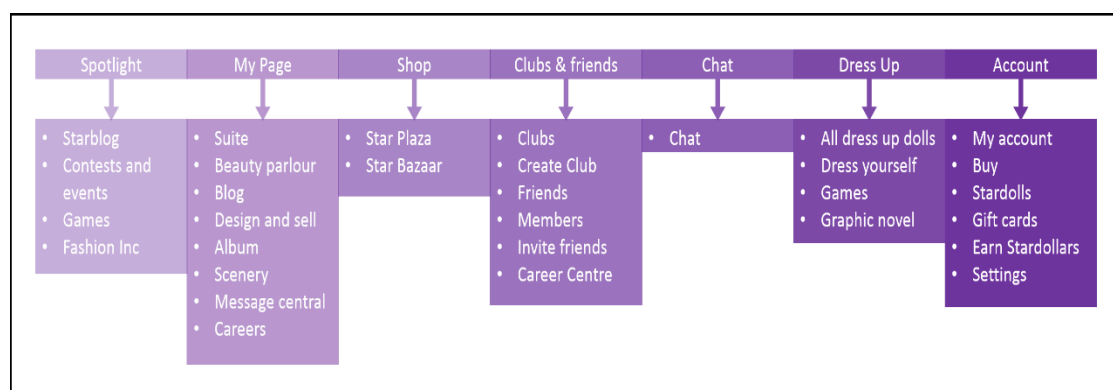
However the currency of the website is further complicated by Starcoins, which are earned by all members for time spent on the site and cannot be purchased. Members can earn up to 1000 Starcoins in a day and these can only be used to purchase a few specific items of clothing on the site. Items that members can buy with Starcoins tend to range between 100 and 200 Starcoins. A member can earn

## Chapter 4 - Introduction to case studies: *Stardoll*, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* and Miley Cyrus

Starcoins by interacting on the site, for example by designing clothes or jewellery, posting in their blog, joining a club or dressing up a celebrity as part of a Stardoll game.

### Mapping *Stardoll*

Figure 4-1 below presents a conceptual map of *Stardoll*. The site can be understood as a number of layers, with each ‘door’ leading to another level with more options or activities. The home page of the website is ‘Spotlight’ and the tabs such as ‘mypage’/ ‘shop’/ ‘clubs’/ ‘chat’/ ‘dress up’/ ‘account’ lead to other areas of the site. I describe each of these main areas of the site in turn.



**Figure 4-1 Map of Stardoll**

### Spotlight

Navigating *Stardoll* starts on the Spotlight homepage, located on the left of the map, an example of the layout of the homepage is presented in Figure 4-2 and Figure 4-3.

Chapter 4 - Introduction to case studies: *Stardoll*, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* and Miley Cyrus

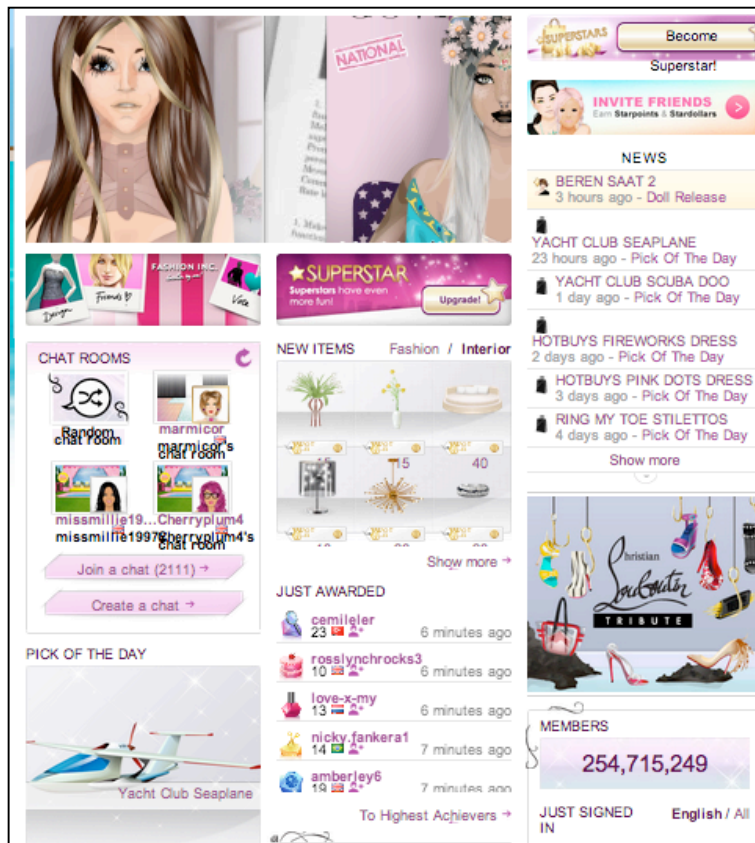


Figure 4-2 Screen shot of Spotlight, Stardoll's homepage

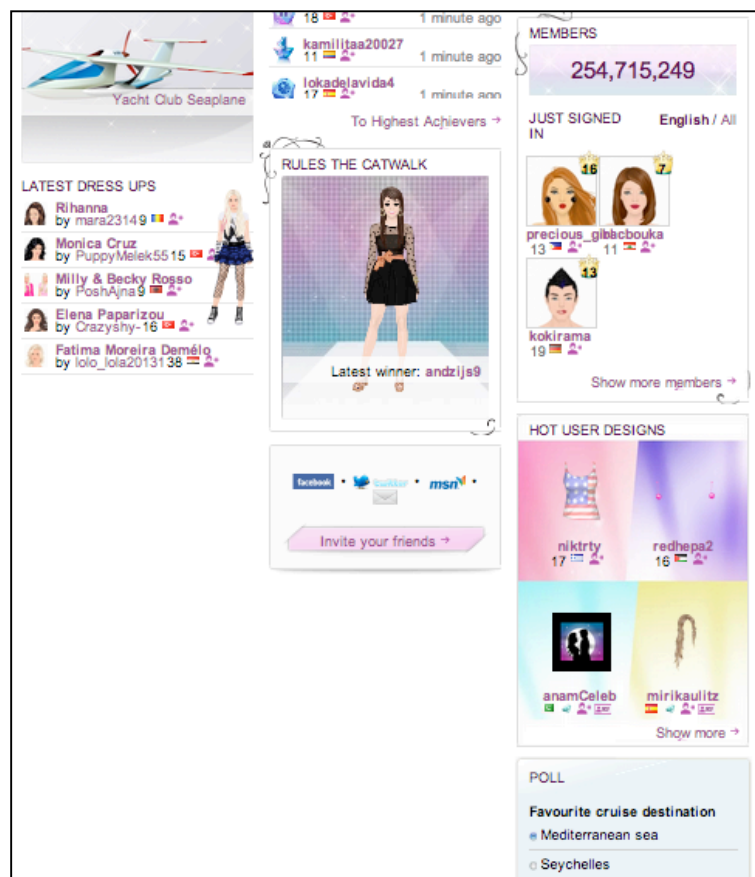


Figure 4-3 Screen shot of Spotlight Stardoll's homepage

Some areas of the Spotlight homepage remain constant, such as the 'Covergirl' competition, adverts to upgrade to Superstar status, inviting friends to join, total membership count, the list of members currently signing in, latest dress ups and opinion polls. However other aspects of the homepage change with particular promotions, giving the site a sense of fluidity and transformation.

The *Starblog*, a consistent feature on *Stardoll's* homepage, is a celebrity gossip blog. The blog articles are published by *Stardoll* staff members and are updated every day. Each blog post has an accompanying comment thread where members can leave comments. I focused one aspect of my data collection on the Starblog to analyse the production and consumption of tween celebrity, which I discuss in Chapter 7.

#### My page

Each *Stardoll* member has an individual homepage that is designed to look like a bedroom suite with a wardrobe, dresser, seats and a bookshelf. The suite is members' own space on the site and is customisable with purchases. Suites are set up as public areas of *Stardoll*, however individuals can change these privacy settings.



Figure 4-4 Screen shot of the suite

Members are invited to create a publicly viewable presentation about themselves that is read together with the individual's suite. Another feature of the suite is the public guestbook where visitors can leave messages. Once friends, members can send private messages to each other. From 'My Page', *Stardoll* members can visit their beauty parlour where they can alter their avatar's hair, makeup, jewellery, face and body.

### Shopping

The 'Starplaza' is the online shopping centre where members can spend their Stardollars buying virtual items of clothing or makeup for their avatars and furnishings for their suites. The items for sale in the Starplaza are branded items, including established offline brands such as Miss Sixty and Channel. A few examples of these brands are shown in the screen shot below.



Figure 4-5 The Starplaza

The other shopping area on *Stardoll*, the 'Starbazaar', is only available to Superstars or those who have reached a certain experience level. It allows members to sell used Starplaza items as well as any items designed and purchased by members. A snapshot of the Starbazaar can be seen below.



Figure 4-6 The Starbazaar

### Clubs and Friends

The 'Clubs and Friends' area of *Stardoll* is only open to members who have certain levels of experience or Superstar membership. *Stardoll* members must have reached Level 8 to join clubs or have Superstar membership and all members must reach Level 11 to start their own club. Clubs are divided into genres, the most

popular being 'celebrity clubs', with 211,192 clubs (July, 2013). In addition there are clubs grouped into 'animal friends clubs' 'hot or not clubs' and 'styles clubs' amongst others. Clubs host discussion boards, guestbooks and polls for their members. Each club also has a section for members to upload pictures they have created, called sceneries. The club's administrator can choose to use one of these to be the image displayed on the homepage of the club.

#### Dress up games

The final area of *Stardoll* is dress up games. The range and style of flash games on *Stardoll* will be explored in the analysis; here I give an overview of the genre of dress up games on the site. Members can dress up their own dolls or celebrity dolls. In addition there are special promotion dolls, for instance one of the sponsored dolls was Smurfette as part of a broader marketing strategy on *Stardoll* to promote the film *Smurfs 2* (2013). This doll is pictured in the screen shot below.



Figure 4-7 Screen shot from The Smurfs Dress Up Game on Stardoll

As a popular tween website *Stardoll* provides a way to explore the commercial construction of girls' cultural spaces online. The website sits at the nexus of a number of cultural phenomena, such as the digitalisation of girlhood, tween culture and celebrity culture. The exploration of these on the site allows for an analysis of the way these phenomena are read together in one cultural space.

### 4.3. The Ugly Side of Stardoll

To complement the data from *Stardoll* I analysed *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, a blog hosted on blogspot.com. The blog was created in 2008 by a number of *Stardoll* members. The operation and maintenance of the site changed hands in the time period I explored the site, however usually there were around four girls operating the space. *Stardoll* members set up the blog to present a space to discuss issues on the site, therefore *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* speaks to the larger case study of this project. Below is a screen shot of the homepage and tagline of the blog; 'shamed, pictured and framed'.





Figure 4-8 Screen shot of the homepage from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

Articles posted on the blog were analysed from the beginning of the blog in 2008 to April 2012. In this time period there were 655 posts on the blog. Each blog post has a set of corresponding comments and polls readers' reactions to the post.

The blog was set up for two functions; first as a way to publically discuss grievances with *Stardoll* amongst the bloggers and readers. Second, the blog works as an advice space for *Stardoll* members. As such it provides a space to analyse the on-going negotiations of tween spaces and allows an exploration of the boundaries of tween spaces as well as how they might be policed by girls themselves. The blog provides an interesting case study for this project as it is an example of girls' active interactions with and negotiations of a tween commercial space. It therefore allows for a nuanced and complex reading of the ways girls may use, consume and confront cultural spaces.

#### **4.4. Tween celebrity case study Miley Cyrus**

*Cyrus* presents an interesting celebrity and fandom case study for this project within *Stardoll* for three reasons. First, the interesting trajectory of Cyrus' celebrity during the period studied, where she moved away from a tween positioning to an adolescent performer. Second, her location within tween culture afforded to her by Disney and her own financial power. Third, her position and popularity on *Stardoll*, which presented the opportunity to explore tween fandom and celebrity gossip situated within a tween site. In the following sections I discuss each of these reasons for choosing Cyrus as the case study in turn. I analyse discursive representations of Cyrus on *Stardoll* from September 2007 to March 2013. I do not explore more recent changes in Cyrus' persona but I suggest this could be an interesting area to examine further.

##### Cyrus' career

Cyrus' career and celebrity trajectories provide a good justification for my focus on her. Cyrus' career began in 2006, aged 13, as the star of Disney's tween television show 'Hannah Montana' (2006 – 2011). Cyrus played the tween female protagonist Miley Stewart who leads a secret double life as Hannah Montana, an international pop sensation. She starred alongside her father, Billy Ray Cyrus, who was cast as her father in Hannah Montana. Hannah Montana premiered on the Disney Channel to the largest audience of any Disney show and became the highest rated series on basic cable (McDowell, 2006). The finale of the series attracted 6.2 million viewers (Gorman, 2011). Hannah Montana was rated as the best cable television series

among children aged 6 – 11 and tweens aged 9 – 14 three times in 2006, 2007 and 2010 (Gorman, 2011). Through the success of Hannah Montana Cyrus secured a prominent location within tween culture. Hannah Montana ran for four seasons ending in 2011 and continues to be repeated on Disney channels.

Hannah Montana launched Cyrus' singing career, with her first single the theme tune to the show, 'The Best of Both Worlds.' Within the period studied Cyrus released the following albums: 'Meet *Miley Cyrus*' (2007), 'Breakout' (2008), 'Can't Be Tamed' (2010) and had three tours, 'Best of Both Worlds' (2007 – 2008), 'Wonder World' (2009) and 'Gypsy Heat' (2011). *Cyrus*' first tour (2007 – 2008) promoted her first album and the soundtrack to Hannah Montana season 2. Tickets were re - sold for an average of \$214, well above their \$25 - \$60 face value (Hall, 2007). Joe Freeman, the vice president of ticket sales site Ticketmaster, commenting on the sale of *Cyrus*' concert tickets said 'Hell hath no fury like the parent of a child throwing a tantrum. People who have been in this business for a long time are watching what's happening, and they say there hasn't been a demand of this level or intensity since The Beatles or Elvis' (Boucher and Lee, 2007). Following the tour Disney released 'Hannah Montana & Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert' a 3D film in cinemas. Furthermore Cyrus has starred in a number of films as an actor, *Bolt* (2008), *Hannah Montana: the movie* (2009), *The Last Song* (2010), *So Undercover* (2011) and *LOL* (2012).

Breaking boundaries

As Cyrus' career progressed she transitioned out of her Disney tween idol persona into an adult singer and actress and this move has been surrounded by controversy. In order for Cyrus to continue to be consumed as part of tween culture her tween status needs to be considered authentic. Bickford (2012) argues the active management and performance of Cyrus as tween age validates her child age status when her performances might erode this status. This highlights the contradictory positions of tween celebrities, if they continue to be consumed as part of tween culture even as they move out of this culture. Cyrus' career trajectory and in particular her increasingly sexualised public persona has been the focus of media commentary, becoming part of the articulation of sexualisation of girls concerns she is seen as violating boundaries of childhood and tweendom. Kennedy (2012), discussing Cyrus' photo shoot for *Vanity Fair*, argues that this moment highlighted the inherent contradictions within the concept of girlhood, as whilst girls are seen as having Girl Power they are also positioned as in need of protection. These conflicting popular imageries of contemporary girlhood are reflected in concerns about girlhood in which girls are perceived as being exposed to 'too much too soon'. I draw on these issues and interrogate the boundaries of tween culture and anxieties about tweens throughout this thesis. Cyrus' changing public persona presents an opportunity to explore her tween trajectory, representations of her celebrity persona and fandom understandings of these transformations.

Cyrus' positionality in tween culture

From this exploration of her celebrity trajectory Cyrus' career progression can be located within a distinctively tween culture. Kennedy (2012) commented on the centrality of Cyrus and Hannah Montana to tween culture. Moreover Blue (2013) argues that because of the position of the franchise within Disney, Hannah Montana is afforded particular discursive and ideological power in shaping articulations of tween girlhood. Therefore Cyrus' status within tween culture through her role in Hannah Montana presents her as a role model and affords her cultural power. Cyrus makes an ideal focus not only as her position as a tween celebrity but her celebrity being central to tween culture.

Tween culture's success has established tween celebrities as significant aspects of celebrity culture, which had previously been dominated by adults. This shift was marked by Forbes by naming 2008 'The Year of the Tween' owing to the number of tween age individuals on their Top 100 list (Millar, 2008) for instance Vanessa Hudgens and Ashley Tisdale. In 2008 Cyrus was placed at number 35 of Forbes' Celebrity 100 list and her pay was estimated to be \$25 million (Millar, 2008). In 2014 Cyrus was at number 17 on Forbes Celebrity 100 list and her earnings were \$36 million (Forbes, 2014). The financial power accrued by celebrities is translated into other forms of power because of their status. Marshall's (1997) analysis of 'celebrity power' is useful in discussing Cyrus' positionality as he argues that celebrities' voices are amplified and given significance in public commentary. The power Cyrus might wield from her celebrity status is intensified within concerns for the sexualisation of girls where celebrities are assumed to have influence over a

passive audience of girls as discussed in Chapter 2. The continued production of Cyrus' tween persona alongside her current controversial celebrity amplifies her important position within celebrity culture as she is discussed within media commentary. I explored how Cyrus' position within tween culture and celebrity culture has afforded her significant forms of power, making her an important focus for the celebrity case study within this project.

#### Cyrus on Stardoll.com

Cyrus has a prominent position on *Stardoll* in two ways, first her tween persona was heavily promoted by *Stardoll* throughout part of the period studied. Upon joining members receive free clothes inspired by the series *Hannah Montana*, both the series and Cyrus form the basis of a number of competitions and there are many Cyrus dress up doll games on the site. References to Cyrus' tween image, *Hannah Montana*, are found throughout the site. Second she is a popular topic for discussion as there are a number of member created clubs focused on her and the comment threads for articles on Cyrus are very active.

#### **4.1.Girls' fandom**

Investigations of girls and their fandom practices have often been based on specific case studies; these examples can shed light on the complex relationship girls have with celebrity culture and also provide a historical trajectory of girls' interaction with popular culture.

The expansion of the commercial music industry heightened interest in girls and their fandom practices. McRobbie and Garber's (1975) seminal study exploring the popularity of the teenybopper phenomenon presents an important point in academic analysis of girl' popular culture consumption. McRobbie and Garber identify three factors in the success of the teenybopper phenomenon. First as girls' leisure time was more restricted and they were subjected to further surveillance the teenybopper culture enabled them to participate from their bedrooms. Second the teenybopper culture required little disposable income, so the opportunity for participation was open to a broader group of girls. Third participation in teenybopper culture was relatively risk free for girls as the male stars could act as the focus of girls' affections but they were not required to act upon them. Therefore the teenybopper phenomenon could position girls as passive consumers of manufactured male stars.

Girls' sexuality has been a focus of research examining their fandom. Ehrenrich, Hess and Jacobs' (1992) argue that girls were the focus of concern within the Beatlemania phenomenon because girls' wider position as enforcers of moral purity was contrasted with the Beatles' sex appeal. Focusing on a more recent group, the Backstreet Boys (Wald, 2002) explored the place of boybands in girl culture. Wald argued that the Backstreet Boys distanced themselves from overt sexuality in order for them to be viewed by adults as safe for girls' consumption. Second they are defined by a normative masculinity where girls' agency is demonstrated in their ability to break boys' hearts. As these examples illustrate girls' consumption of sexualised popular culture, in the form of male stars, have been concerns

historically. With a contemporary focus Patterson and Sears (2011) argue that fears over girls' consumption of celebrity culture have revolved around out of control female celebrities such as Spears, Winehouse and Lohan. These examples demonstrate how sexuality is used as a boundary between appropriate childhood and adolescent development as discussed in Chapter 2. I explore the discursive representations of tween celebrity through the case study of Cyrus on Stardoll.

McRobbie and Garber (1975) argue that cultures that are considered 'girlie' are often pre-packaged cultural artefacts, such as the teenybopper phenomenon. The understanding of girls as a passive audience is emphasized in Lewis' (1990) study exploring the music industry, where she argues that because female celebrities were seen as manufactured and cast as inauthentic, the girls who consumed them were positioned as 'cultural dupes'. Furthermore both Wald's (2002) and Nash and Lahti's (1999) work explored the systematic devaluing of girls' music and film tastes. Lowe (2003), Murray (2007) and Wolf (2007) have explored the function of fandom for girls. Lowe argued that their mocking consumption of Spears gave girls the opportunity to explore their own sexuality. In similar ways Murray's research with fans of *My So Called Life*, and Wolf's work with fans of *Wicked* found that girls used these media texts to understand themselves and their identity construction. Furthermore Wolf (2007) notes the construction of *Wicked*'s fans as passive and argues that there is a gendered understanding of fandom. However despite a broader cultural rejection of girlie culture as inauthentic and manufactured, McRobbie and Garber found that the teenybopper phenomenon gave girls a public cultural space in which they could define themselves as distinct from children and



teenagers. McRobbie and Garber's (1975) argument that girls have active choice in the success of stars because of their consumer power is reflected in Taft's (2004) more recent work on the emergence of tween culture. However the conception of girls as passive consumers who are controlled by marketers has maintained cultural traction.

The development of tween celebrities such as Cyrus who are part of broader tween culture present new media texts for young girls to consume. I now turn to explore the ways that new media ecologies have presented fundamental changes to the consumption of celebrity and to fandom practices, these changes require new sites for research.

#### **4.2.Digital fandom**

There is a burgeoning field of literature exploring the potential opportunities and functions of online fandom (see for example Baym, 1998 and Wolf, 2007). Drawing on Levy's (1998) notion of 'collective intelligence', Jenkins argues 'consumption has become a collective process' (2006: 4) within online spaces. Moreover this has altered the production of celebrity and celebrity - fandom relationships. Cohen (2014) notes that social media has fundamentally changed media relationships for celebrities who have access to communication with their fans and for fans who are connected to each other. Furthermore Jenkins (2006) argues that because the stimulus for fandom relationships is an affinity or identification with a particular aspect of popular culture it is not characterized by geographical location and is therefore easily adaptable to the global online media ecology.

Online spaces for fandom have raised questions over cultural production and consumption. Jenkins (2006) explores how online spaces have presented new opportunities for children's engagement with popular culture through the Harry Potter fan fiction site 'The Daily Prophet'. First he points to the potential of online spaces, such as The Daily Prophet, in allowing children to participate as cultural producers within fan spaces on a global scale. Second Jenkins argues that fan sites such as The Daily Prophet highlight the ability of a network of fans to effectively communicate and, in this case mount a global campaign against Warner Brothers. The opportunities offered by online fandom spaces as evidenced by Jenkins' discussion have particular bearing for tween fandom practices because of the global nature of tween culture.

Drawing on my discussion in the previous chapter research on girls' online activities have been framed as a 'virtual bedroom', reflecting McRobbie and Garber's (1975) exploration of bedroom culture as a key site for girls' consumption of culture. Chen's (2001) analysis of Spears' fandom argues that the Internet expands opportunities for girls' fandom whilst retaining the private nature of bedroom culture. Since Chen's research, new opportunities for the production of celebrity and fandom practices have been created through the expansion of social media and this has amplified fandom cultures girls can access from their bedrooms. In discussing the role of social media in fan cultures Busman argues that the 'difference between earlier decades and now is that you didn't have constant information thrown at you, and you didn't have the ability to instantly communicate about what and where your favorite artist was going' (Busman, 2013

in Gerstein, 2013). The use of social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram by celebrities and fans is reconstituting how fandom practices operate. The primary case study for this project, *Stardoll* is a tween social networking site with a focus on celebrity culture and presents new opportunities for girls' engagement in celebrity gossip and fandom practices.

### **4.3.Conclusion**

In combining the overlapping case studies of Cyrus, *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* as cultural points of focus this project can explore a number of interlinking cultural trajectories in order to interrogate representations and negotiations of tween culture. In this chapter I have outlined each of the interlinking case studies in order to contextualise the methodological discussion in the next chapter, and the analysis of these spaces in later chapters. I then presented a brief overview of literature that has examined girls' fandom and discussed how the Internet as a transformative space for fandom practices is emerging as a research interest. I have argued that tween fandom has not been explored within new media ecologies despite the potential for global fandom within tween culture's homogeneity. Following on from the discussion in this chapter I discuss a range of methodological decisions and challenges in data collection and analysis on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5. Methodology

### 5.1.Introduction

I begin this chapter by situating girlhood research within virtual spaces, I argue that online research offers new opportunities for studying integral aspects of contemporary girlhood but requires new approaches to data collection and analysis. In the previous chapter I outlined the three interlinking case studies within this project and building on this discussion I present a methodological rationale for these sites in this chapter.

I combined a 'cultural analysis' of websites with ethnographic techniques, specifically 'immersion' and 'mapping', in my approach to this project. The process of data collection and analysis on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* was divided into two stages. The first stage involved a long period of immersion on each site. The second stage was a more systematic approach to data collection on specific areas of the sites identified from stage one of the research process and guided by the overarching research interests of the project. I discuss a number of issues in situating research on websites, notably the complexity and fluidity of these spaces and the use of web archives. I argue that the combination of a cultural analysis approach with ethnographic traditions enabled a rich engagement and understanding of the websites.

Furthermore situating research online requires rethinking ethical considerations. I draw on two fields of ethical literatures to contextualise the ethical framework I

used to guide the research. First I examine emerging discussions of ethics online research, arguing for a situational approach to ethics. The second field of literature I explored is the established ethics of undertaking research with children, where I draw on discussions of children's voices in research.

Finally I outline the analytic framework for the project. First I discuss the traditional media studies approaches, discourse and semiotic analysis, that I used to interrogate the sites. I discuss the application of these approaches to websites and evaluate how they may offer particular benefits for analysis online because of the nature of online interactions. Complementing this I utilised a number of analytic tools in order to interrogate the way websites work as interactive spaces. I argue the combination of media studies techniques and analytic tools enables web spaces to be analysed in three-dimensional ways, not just as media texts but also as interactive spaces.

## **5.2.Situating research online**

In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 I considered the increasing centrality of children's interaction on the Internet in opening up new arenas to situate childhood research and to examine girls' cultural consumption. Changes to the production and consumption of cultures online require resituating research to capture these new arenas for dialogue. Ess and Consalvo (2011) note digital spaces have undergone substantial changes since the emergence of online social research emphasising the evolution from text based webpages to more complex spaces comprising of images, sound, games, graphics and video. The recent proliferation of online spaces are

often grouped together and termed 'new social media'. Web 2.0 technologies with an emphasis on social interaction have emerged as distinctive pathways for online research. Social media is characterised by its interactivity, presenting researchers with new sites to study social interaction. My focus on girls' consumption of tween culture is part of this. Edwards et al. (2013) further distinguish interactivity on web spaces as they argue it is produced in real or near real time.

Situating girlhood research online presents the opportunity to explore girls' understandings of digital cultures and addressing Hains' (2012) concern for the lack of research privileging children's voices. Online research enables the collection of data created by girls in their participation in tween culture rather than collecting these understandings through artificial research settings. Positioning research online captures new arenas for girls' cultural consumption and offers different perspectives in researching their interactions. Both of the sites used in this project fall under different understandings of children's websites as *Stardoll* is a commercial website produced for children by adults, whereas *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is a site established and run by *Stardoll* members for other girls.

### **5.3. *Stardoll* a case study**

The term 'case study' has been applied to describe a range of research designs leading Hammersley and Gomm (2000) to argue that there are many dimensions to defining case study research. Their general definition that 'usually 'case study' refers to research that investigates a few cases, often just one, in considerable depth' (Hammersley and Gomm, 2000: 3) is used in this thesis. In this section I

discuss how my choice of *Stardoll* as the overarching case study for this work can be seen as a typical case and argue that in choosing this website an analysis of broader tween culture online can be explored. According to Flyvbjerg's (2006) description of various kind of selection for case studies *Stardoll* would fit within an information-oriented selection as the case was chosen because of the tween cultural space created on the site, which I analyse in Chapter 6. *Stardoll* is a typical case in two overlapping areas of children's culture, first as part of a growing genre of tween age websites and second as part of a global tween culture that is highly gendered as outlined in Chapter 2.

As examined by Flyvbjerg (2006) there are a number of misunderstandings around the application and use of case study research. His evaluation of the argument that the case study approach is of limited value because it cannot be generalised is of particular relevance here. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues this critique is an oversimplification of the value of case studies and the method can provide information about broader situations depending on the case study chosen. Furthermore as Lincoln and Guba (2000) argue case studies reside on a continuum between the unique and the generalisable. *Stardoll* is a case study of a broader group of children's websites that are created for the tween age range. Specifically *Stardoll* is part of a smaller group within the larger genre of children's websites that can be characterised by their social networking functions, their use of avatars rather than user generated images and the commercialised world they create for children. As argued by Mitchell and Walsh (2005) these are significant characteristics of tween age websites. Other notable websites in this group include

Moshi Monsters, Club Penguin, Kidz World, WebKinz and Neopets. However *Stardoll's* overtly marked gender space as a website for girls distinguishes it from these other websites. Although as discussed in Chapter 3 research has demonstrated a gendered use of avatar websites which may mean that other websites in this category are populated by more girls. In the gendered space created for girls *Stardoll* can also be seen as part of a genre of girls' websites that often revolve around doll play, for example Barbie.com and Bratz.com. In drawing on doll play as the central feature of *Stardoll* the website can be seen as typical of many girls' websites.

Furthermore *Stardoll* is a case study of offline tween culture, capturing the increasing location of children's cultures in online or virtual spaces. *Stardoll* is a global commercial tween website and claims to be 'the world's largest online fashion and dress up games community for girls!' (2014), currently the site has over 3 million members worldwide (2014). *Stardoll's* target audience is female and young, the use of avatars and style of the site aim it at the pre-teen market. As such *Stardoll* is part of the global commercial tween culture that I wanted to explore and presented an interesting opportunity to analyse the construction of a tween site online. Therefore the choice of case study enables an in depth analysis of two intersecting aspects of children's culture, tween age websites and global tween culture. Moreover the emergent nature of research examining children's spaces online means that the in depth analysis of *Stardoll*, and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* may be examined in relation to other spaces online, an aspect of case study research discussed by Lincoln and Guba (2000) as 'fittingness'. The value of a case



study approach during the emergence of a field is highlighted by the congruence between the context studies and other contexts. As I have outlined in this section the choice of *Stardoll* as the location for this study is a typical case when examining tween age websites and girls' spaces online therefore achieving the 'fittingness' Lincoln and Guba discuss.

In addition one of the core aims of the project was to investigate girls' consumption of tween culture in online spaces and *Stardoll* enabled an exploration of this with two foci. First *Stardoll's* emphasis on celebrity culture meant I could outline a tween celebrity case study on the site enabling me to analyse both the production and consumption of tween celebrity culture online. As I mentioned in the previous chapter the *Starblog* presented a key site for *Stardoll's* production of discursive representations and girls' discussions of celebrity culture. Furthermore as discussed in Chapter 4, I chose Cyrus as the tween celebrity case study because of her prominence on *Stardoll* and her position within tween culture. Second analysis of *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* enabled me to investigate another aspect of girls' consumption of tween culture. The blog raised questions of how girls are able to negotiate tween culture online and in what ways agency might be constrained. The interlinking case studies of *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* presented rich sites for this research as they enabled an exploration of the production and consumption of tween culture online.

#### **5.4. Research design: combining the cultural analysis of websites and ethnographic traditions**

Within the emerging field of online social research there has been discussion over the application of established offline methods to online spaces, with scholars taking advantage of a range of opportunities to undertake research online (Brugger, 2011). However approaches to the analysis of websites are relatively underexplored in methodological literature. I have drawn on a number of qualitative approaches in my consideration and analysis of *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. Framing my exploration of the sites is the concept of a 'cultural analysis of websites' (Pauwels, 2008), which I outline below. Complementing this approach I drew on ethnographic techniques, primarily observation, mapping and archival research in navigating and understanding the websites. Blending these techniques together I gained a rich analysis of the two research sites.

The data for this project from *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* was collected between August 2011 and April 2013. The data collected from the *Starblog* archived on *Stardoll* covered the period from 2007 to 2013. The data obtained from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* spanned blog posts published between 2008 and 2012. There were two stages to the research approach; first, immersive exploration of the sites and second, systematic data collection on identified areas of the websites.

##### **5.4.1. Stage One: Immersion in digital spaces**

Pauwels' (2008) idea for a 'cultural analysis of websites' formed the methodological framework for this research project. While Pauwels (2008) notes that much online

research has focused on text the Internet is a rich source of visual and auditory data and these aspects are important for understanding spaces online. Pauwels comments that 'only very infrequently is a more encompassing analysis of the interplay of all features (verbal, visual, auditory) provided' (2008: 607). Furthermore notes the multi-layered structure of websites and the importance of flow through the space as an intrinsic part of the operation of sites. In taking a cultural analysis approach the complexity and interactivity of websites can be explored in addition to a textual and semiotic analysis of content. Pauwels goes on to argue that the cultural decoding of websites should look for 'explicit and implicit statements on cultural issues' (2008: 609). He argues that this can be done through a number of analytical tools in an approach he terms 'hybrid media analysis'. I outline my analytic approach later in the chapter.

Complementing the cultural analysis of websites I drew on a number of ethnographic traditions in my exploration of the sites. The application of ethnographic methods online has been termed 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2010), 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2008), 'cyber ethnographies' (Ashford, 2009) or 'digital ethnography' (Murthy, 2008). The use of ethnographic research techniques to online spaces as a way of researching and documenting digital social interaction is unsurprising considering the potential of these kinds of research. In line with traditional forms of ethnography Hine argues the key principle of virtual ethnography is 'understanding through participation' (2008: 259). The boundaries of my participation on the sites are difficult to define because of the range of participation positions in online spaces. On *Stardoll* I set up an account to enable

me to explore the virtual space. As a public blog *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* did not require membership. I did not interact with any members on either site. Paechter (2013) discusses this as a 'peripherally participant role'. The extent of lurking is hard to gauge but in their exploration Preece et al. argue that for 'some communities lurking is the norm' (2004: 203).

The potential for communication with other members was limited by the focus of the project, as the immersive process of navigating and investigating the functions of *Stardoll* required no interaction. Furthermore specific areas of interest on the sites were either non interactive and therefore can only be read in an observational fashion or were historically produced before the time of research, limiting any potential for interaction. In her discussion of a wide range of virtual ethnographies Hine argues the fundamental principle of the method is 'learning through immersion, supported by more systematic forms of enquiry' (2008: 259). This broader understanding of ethnographic processes as 'learning through immersion' and not necessarily interactive participation with members describes my research as I drew on ethnographic principles for the purpose of understanding and contextualising the web spaces.

Research on each site began with a period of immersion. During this stage I approached the project by exploring, observing and taking notes for months before deciding on areas for a systematic data collection. This stage enabled me to gain an in depth view of the sites and how they worked. This overview was particularly invaluable in understanding and analysing *Stardoll* as a large, complex and constantly changing site. During this stage each site was mapped, observation

notes taken and I kept a research diary to trace changes on the sites. These research processes were similar to many accounts of offline ethnographic research.

Andrews (2012) reflects that map making is rooted in ethnographic traditions and in discussing the relevance of this technique to research in virtual spaces Dodge (2006) argues that through the course of mapping researchers can make cyberspaces substantial. Furthermore, Dodge (2010) argues that mapping can reveal meaningful structures within social cyberspaces. As part of my research process I created maps of *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. Mapping *Stardoll* presented a number of difficulties as it is a vast, fluid website with many layers which at first seemed complex to analyse as a whole. My process of mapping had three aims, first to see the 'flow' of the space, second to visualise the space over time and third to explore how the space is rule governed. Mapping these changes over the period I researched the site meant I could see which aspects transformed and in what ways, giving me a sense of the fluidity of *Stardoll*. In the second stage of the research, detailed in the next section, I focused on specific archived areas of the sites to undertake an intensive analysis; mapping these spaces meant I could visualise interactions over time. These maps gave me an idea of the intensity of interaction that I would have missed by focusing on individual text utterances. This overview proved invaluable to analysing the development of discourses over time.

Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) frame websites as fluid cultural products, and change was an inherent aspect of *Stardoll*, presenting methodological and analytical challenges. Thematically *Stardoll* remained consistent over the period of research. However these discourses were articulated through changing texts.

Keeping a research diary and observation notes enabled me to capture these changes. In order to keep track of these changes screen shots were taken of parts of the site that changed to have a visual trajectory of the space to support the observations from the research notes. Taking this approach to research and data collection meant that the discursive and semiotic construction of tween girlhood on the site could be identified during the time I analysed the site, whilst being able to retain the fluidity that is a feature of the website. In comparison, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is a fairly static blog space where new content is added within the same format and older content archived. The feel and background of the blog remained constant throughout the time I was exploring the space.

During the first stage of research on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* I found core sites of interest for my project and became more focused on these in my analysis. The methodological decisions and issues in stage two of this research project will now be discussed.

### **5.4.2. Stage Two: Systematic data collection**

The second stage of data collection on each site was focused around particular areas identified in stage one of the research process and considering the overarching focus of the project. On *Stardoll*, the *Starblog* formed the focus of the systematic data collection, whereas on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* I chose to focus on the content of their main blog posts.

*Stardoll's Starblog* is primarily a celebrity gossip blog but also reports on fashion trends both on the site and offline and reviews films. *Stardoll* staff write the blog

and in addition each article on the *Starblog* has a corresponding comment space. This was a significant source for the exploration of celebrity representation and consumption. I focused my data collection on articles reporting on Miley Cyrus and the associated comment threads. Due to the absence of a search or tagging functions on the site the archives had to be manually searched and filtered through. Once the news articles had been found screen shots were taken of the news article and responding comments. These were then converted into PDFs and imported into Nvivo for analysis.

Limiting the focus of in depth discourse analysis to this area of the website made qualitative analysis within the large site of *Stardoll* possible. The approach limited the problems Edwards et al (2013) outline with qualitative analysis of social media communications. The decision to focus on the *Starblog* was made for a number of reasons. First this part of *Stardoll* is a contained set of interlinking data and therefore could be collected and analysed as a whole data set. Second this data set captured tween celebrity representation and consumption, an aspect of tween culture that I wanted to explore. Finally through this contained data set it was possible to analyse the whole thread of *Miley Cyrus* news articles and comments that gave a historical perspective to the project. Therefore the combination of analysis of both the meta discourses of the site as tween cultural space and the interactions of the *Starblog* allowed a qualitative analysis of the space. During the second stage of research on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the blog posts were read in chronological order and screen shots were taken. These were then organised by a number of themes that developed out of the explorations in stage one of the

research. The screen shots within each theme were read again and analysed. Finally the screen shots were converted to PDF's and imported into Nvivo in order to be able to recall the data from each theme quickly.

The approach I took to the exploration of these spaces could be described as ethnographic in nature as it involves 'rich description of interactions'. In complicating understandings of ethnography further Paechter (2012) draws on Forsey's (2010) idea of 'engaged listening', which he contends is central to ethnographic work. Paechter argues the concept of engaged listening is pertinent for virtual ethnographies as it more accurately describes the research process rather than framing it as observational.

#### **5.4.3. Archiving *Stardoll* and *the Ugly Side of Stardoll* opportunities and challenges**

The areas chosen as focal points on each site were archived spaces. The Internet as a space for the storage of data has framed new ways of researching and altered understandings and uses of the archive as a tool for social researchers. Gill and Elder (2012) suggest that the Internet as a site of archiving has enabled the storage of more material and that this is often 'everyday' in its nature. Both *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* archived activities on the sites and this was invaluable to the scope and analysis of this project.

*Stardoll* archives particular parts of the website and these are publically available within the site for any member to view. One aspect of their archives is the *Starblog* where articles and associated comments are stored together. These are open



archives as it is possible to add new comments once a post has been archived so the discussion threads are not necessarily inactive. Comments on *Starblog* articles about *Miley Cyrus* and *Hannah Montana* tended to cluster within a few days of the post appearing. The structure of *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is an automatic archiving system, posts are archived according to date, month and year of original posting. The article is archived alongside any comments and readers votes on the post. As on *Stardoll* these archives are not closed but were also generally inactive once a new article was posted.

Digital archives have been discussed by scholars in terms of the potential to make offline archives available online (Bolick, 2006). There has also been a growing discussion of the manner in which the Internet acts as an archive and of The Internet Archive as a project to record the web (Thelwall and Vaughan, 2004). As Featherstone asks 'should the walls of the archive be extended and placed around the everyday world?' (2000: 170), a question that is particularly pertinent when discussing the potential for digital archives and highlights the everyday nature of data that can be stored. Beer and Burrow's (2013) discussion on different forms of digital archives provides a framework for defining the types of archive I researched. They argue that the opinion or viewpoint archive is 'created through the practices of blogging, micro-blogging and the contributions made to a broad range of Web 2.0 type websites' (2013: 54). The *Starblog* archives and the stored content from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* fall into this category, as they are a space for commentary and response.

Archived spaces on each website presented a range of opportunities for the scope of this project as I was able to take a historical view of girls' cultural consumption and trace how this may have changed over time. As the production of tween celebrity culture and consumption in digital spaces formed the case study for this section the *Starblog* archives presented an opportunity to study spontaneous reactions to and discussions of celebrity trajectories. This enabled me to view the unfolding of two interlinking trajectories, that of the tween icon and tween fandom through a period of transition. The archived articles on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* presented a similar opportunity for investigating how girls' negotiations of *Stardoll* were framed. However the wealth of potential data is also a challenge for online research as data accumulates and becomes increasingly difficult to qualitatively sift through and analyse. Finding relevant, focused data with the *Starblog* was a challenge as the lack of a search function meant Cyrus' articles and comments had to be searched for within the entire *Starblog* archive. The archival data collection on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* was much quicker as it was easier to identify relevant data as it is a smaller website than *Stardoll*.

Another issue with undertaking archival research on websites was the lack of control over the data, mirroring long standing methodological issues with using archives. Featherstone (2000), discussing the historical development of archives, talks about a 'politics of the archive' and Tamboukou argues that 'archival research is fragmented through and through' (2014: 632). The lack of control was highlighted when some way into the data collection process a different archived part of *Stardoll*, Cyrus fan groups created by members, were deleted. This meant

that a potentially rich source of data that I had just begun to explore could no longer be used. Tamboukou argues that researchers are not usually part of the decision making process through which data gets stored in an archive and because of this researchers are unaware of what is missing. This lack of knowledge of the archival process replicates these concerns in online spaces. However in choosing a self-contained space of *Stardoll* I hoped to reduce potential missing data.

The strength of historical analysis allowed for the exploration of the development of discourses on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* over a number of years. Having the ability to take a historical approach to the project gives the discussion a unique perspective.

#### **5.4.4. Organisation and presentation of data**

Due to the nature of doing an in-depth cultural and historical analysis of two websites there was a large amount of data to organise. Screen shots taken from *Stardoll* were organised according to the way the website was set out and the majority of these were comments attached to articles published on the *Starblog*. The changing nature of the site was captured through collating screen shots of the same spaces of the site over the research period. The screen shots taken from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* were organised by theme as discussed before.

Thousands of screen shots including textual and visual material from both sites were taken, organised and archived over the period of research. Screen shots and quotations of text have been used throughout the analytical chapters to illustrate and contextualise the discussion. Where text appears it is accurately replicated

from the text in screen shots, often containing misspelt words or typing errors, slang and emoticons. The use of slang by the girls in comment threads is common and understanding some of this language use is only evident from looking at the articulations on the thread over time. Both on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the expression of written language conveys additional information on the emotions of the speaker. For example girls often used capital letters to convey shouting as well as a variety of emoticons and punctuation to underscore or demonstrate their meaning. The interactions of girls is a central focus of this project and therefore I have replicated the written text as it appears on the sites, which is important not only for an analysis of the use of language but in order to grasp the speech contexts.

Due to the changing nature of websites it is not possible to include links to the online location as in many cases these spaces no longer exist. Where text or images have been used in this thesis it is made clear from which website they were collected.

### **5.5.Ethical considerations in online spaces**

In this section I outline the ethical considerations of this project. I have drawn together two fields of ethical discussion, online research and researching with children.

#### **5.5.1. Online social research**

Within the emerging field of online social research ethical implications have arisen as an area of prominent discussion and debate. This commentary has reframed

some established ethical concerns as well as given rise to new issues to be approached by researchers. Whiteman (2012) explores the similarities and differences in thinking about ethics in online and offline situations. Research in offline situations, she argues, tends to be based on accepted understandings of ethical behaviour. The possibilities of online research has challenged some of these established understandings and confronted researchers with new issues.

The British Sociological Association's ethical guidelines (2002) do not sufficiently cover ethical standards for Internet research, stating that ethical guidelines are not well developed. The guidelines suggest that researchers inform themselves of emerging debates when undertaking online research. From the beginning of this project key ethical debates and guidelines were used to inform the research process, in particular the discussion was framed by The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) 'Ethics Guide' (AOIR, 2012). This discussion is outlined by two shifts in ethical discussions from offline to online situations defined by Whiteman (2012). The first is the importance of context for ethical discussions and the second is the flexibility of ethics throughout the research process.

The complexities of the ethical discussions of this project are compounded by the interlinking websites and the in-depth analysis of particular aspects of the sites. I discuss the ethical thought process of this project through the trajectory of decision making in the context of the two sites, *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The combination of cultural analysis and ethnographic techniques, described in the previous section, was informed by ethical debates and the nature of my participation on the sites meant that I had no direct interaction with members.

Whiteman (2012) identifies a shift in researchers' discussions concerning how to research ethically, the dismissing of universal ethical principles in favour of a more context based and, situation relevant, ethical considerations. The difficulties of applying universal ethical principles to research projects indiscriminately are reinforced in the Association of Internet Researchers' (AOIR) ethical guidelines. They argue that ethical problems give rise to a number of responses and therefore discussion and disagreement is part of the process. However it can be noted that the AOIR warn against moving from this pluralistic approach to a relativist approach to ethics.

For this project I drew on a situational ethics approach that was based on the websites and the areas within the sites, so I considered slightly different ethical perspectives for the two sites of research. Whiteman argues that ethical decisions should be 'based upon an understanding of their research settings and consideration of the specificities of their research interests' (2012: 10). The two websites researched in this project differ in important ways for the consideration of ethics, the public or private nature of the two sites, issues of informed consent and anonymity.

While a situational ethical approach works well for this project the value of having some universal ethical concerns is not ignored. Rosenberg (2010) notes that the general principle of maximising benefits and minimise any harm should be abided by when conducting online research, a general ethical standard that was part of the development of this project. When considering any form of potential harm to others a central aspect to discuss is the topic area. For this project the research

focuses on the construction of tween cultural spaces, negotiations of these sites and discussions of Cyrus do not fall into the category of sensitive topics.

#### Public and private divides online

My decision to conduct the research in particular areas of the websites raises questions concerning the extent to which online spaces can be considered 'public' and 'private' and looks at the impact these categorisations have on the research process in lights of ethical considerations. The difficulty in defining public and private boundaries has become a key discussion for online researchers (Rosenberg, 2010). The significance that is placed on defining public and private spaces online arises from established offline research practices where there are different ethical conventions based on this distinction. For this project it is helpful to look at the distinctions made by the AOIR who discuss the distinction between subjects and authors when considering ethics. Authors intend their text to be viewed by the public. The girls who create and run *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* can be considered to be authors and their text on the blog can be considered to be public as the blog is explicitly intended for a broader audience. *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* was set up as publically viewable blog in order to provide a public space for discussion or advice. As it intends to speak to a broader audience the public nature of *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is clear.

However, for other aspects of this project the boundaries between public and private websites are further complicated by the existence of both public and private

parts of an individual website. Within *Stardoll* it is possible to explore a variety of spaces, some of which are more or less public. Individuals' suites and guestbook occupy an ambiguous position as members can choose to only allow their friends to see these areas. However as discussed by Morey, Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2011) the boundaries between public and private areas on sites are often porous. However in comparison to the design of more private areas of the site the *Starblog* and associated comments are public areas of the site where any member can read and comment. The research undertaken for this project was situated within the public areas on *Stardoll*. First the homepage, virtual shopping mall and gaming areas can be considered public spaces and there is little opportunity for interaction with other members within these spaces. These parts can be considered public because individuals do not have to join up or reach certain levels of experience to see and use these spaces. Second the public pages about *Stardoll* were analysed and these parts of the site were intended for an outside audience, for example the safety information refers to parents and guardians. The public nature of these spaces within the site extends outside of membership to *Stardoll*. Finally the *Starblog* and associated comments were analysed. The *Starblog* operates as a gossip magazine and is considered part of the public spaces as the homepage and shopping mall already discussed, likewise the comment threads are public and cannot be made private by individuals. In their location, attached to the *Starblog*, they are positioned as public comment spaces. The concept of private spaces online is complex and there are different meanings of the public and private divide. Research on *Stardoll* demonstrated distinctive modalities of understanding privacy



on one site, which are further complication by expectations of parental monitoring in the context of children's websites.

### Informed consent

When thinking about universal ethical considerations informed consent is often noted as central to undertaking ethical research. Gaining informed consent is complicated by undertaking research in online environments, as Whiteman (2012) argues it can be difficult and disruptive. For this research project it would be impossible as all of the user – generated data came from archives dating back to 2007. I feel that in the research situations of *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the impossibility of gaining informed consent is balanced by the topics being researched, which are not private or confidential. Drawing again on the overarching ethical consideration of harm I feel that these attributes of the project adhere to the principle of not doing harm to individuals.

### Anonymity

Debates around the use of real names or pseudonyms are part of ethical discussions in online and offline settings. Herring (1996) analyses the contradictions in guidelines when researching online data. On the one hand data online can be considered published and therefore should be accredited to the author. On the other data published online is considered private and therefore all names should be omitted. This perhaps highlights the issues with attempting to

apply universal ethical rules to all research situations and supports advocates of a situation - based ethical considerations. Each of the sites researched required different ethical considerations. *Stardoll* encourages girls to create a 'nickname'; in addition they advise that girls do not give out personal information such as their name. In many cases the girls chose to have celebrity or celebrity inspired usernames on the site. There is no other personal information on the members available to view on the site such as age or location. There is an additional layer of anonymity as the infrastructure of *Stardoll* means that there is no internal search function within the website and therefore it is impossible to search for quotes or usernames. Thinking about ethical concerns in a situational manner the structure of the site means that quotes being identified on the site are unlikely. *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is an explicit public space, where the girls position their audience as the wider *Stardoll* community. On the blog the girls use their *Stardoll* usernames on the blog and actively encourage readers to find them on *Stardoll*. Despite the different situations in terms of anonymity and the extent to which interaction of the sites could be considered private I chose to omit all names for quotes that appear in this thesis.

Whiteman (2012) identifies another change in ethical considerations where these are viewed in flux throughout the research process, engaging the researcher in ethical thought from beginning to end. Alongside the development of this project was the trajectory of ethical considerations that changed as the research progressed. The decision to research *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* during the research process reflects this ethical trajectory, where ethical decisions needed to be

reconsidered in the light of a new online space. Taking both a reflexive and situational approach to this project a number of key ethical concerns of both online and offline research environments could be explored in context.

### **5.5.2. Ethics: researching children's cultural spaces**

The second ethical field of relevance to this project is discussions concerning conducting research with children. Ethical concerns when researching with children developed within offline research sites, methods and processes and there has been little discussion over how these relate to online research practices. The British Sociological Association's ethical guidelines state that 'research involving children requires particular care' (2002: 4). Within the field of childhood studies there has been a shift from researching 'on' children and childhood, to researching 'with' children (Morrow and Richards, 1996) as part of the new sociology of childhood discussed in Chapter 2. As I was researching children's spaces online drawing on this wealth of literature informed my ethical considerations. A number of key ethical concerns have developed out of participatory research with children, notably the appropriateness of research methods, issues of consent and power dynamics (for a comprehensive exploration of these issues see Alderson and Morrow (2011)). There are some emerging studies exploring how these research values are translated into online sites however considering the range of online spaces this could be further explored. One notable example is Moinian's (2006) research on children's online diaries, who argues that online research with children is complicated because often activities being studied are outside of adult control. The online nature of the research makes gaining informed consent from children

and adults, often required in offline research, impossible. However there is a distinction between these kinds of participatory research methods with children, whether online or offline, and my research on children's online spaces. Much of the discussion mentioned above concerns how the researcher *interacts* with children through their research whereas my research looked at archived speech.

Situating research online presents a new opportunity to observe girls' consumption of culture without the need for artificial research settings. This is of relevance to the ethical discussion on children because of a concern within the field over how children's voices are represented within research. James (2007) argues that it is not enough to focus on reporting children's voices but that researchers need to engage in the representation of their voices. I have been conscious of the representation of the girls' voices throughout the research process. In my analysis and the presentation of the data I have emphasised the importance of the girls' voices within the archived material.

Drawing two ethical literatures together, emerging concepts of ethical digital research and established notions of undertaking research with children, have contextualised the ethical framework for this project.

### **5.6. Analytic methods**

In this project I used a combination of approaches to the analysis of data, drawn from the established field of media studies and a number of additional analytic tools for specific areas of focus. From traditional approaches to studying media I used discourse and semiotic analysis forming part of my cultural approach to

research the websites. However exploring and deconstructing websites as pieces of media does not fully allow an analysis of the website or blog because of the interactivity in terms of website design and functionality of these spaces. Therefore to complement established media studies approaches I used a number of concepts to analyse the interactivity that is embedded in the sites such as notions of capital and speech genre. Due to the scope and interest of this project a number of analytical tools were used in combination because of the range of cultural arenas explored within this project.

### **5.6.1. Media studies approach**

Undertaking web based research is an emerging field and as such there is a developing literature exploring ways to applying traditional analytic methods. Combining discourse and semiotic analysis was important for understanding the sites. Pauwels (2005) observes that analysis of websites has tended to remain within the exploration of the verbal utterances in these spaces, however websites are visual pieces of media. First, the visual design is central to communication of websites. Second, the visual creation of tween cultural spaces contextualise discourses and utterances that are produced there in so far as they have particular situated meanings because they are being spoken on *Stardoll* or on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*.

### Semiotic analysis

Semiology or semiotics is the investigation of how images make meanings (see for example Barthes, 1972, Rose, 2012 and Berger, 2012). Taking a semiotic approach to this project meant that the construction of tween cultural websites could be deconstructed and explored as systems of interlinking cultural signs. Semiotic analysis is a well-established approach within media studies and despite the novel situation of the research online many of the traditional subjects for semiotics intersect with my analysis such as advertising and celebrity culture. Through semiotic analysis researchers aim to identify signs or signifiers and explore their position in relation to one another. Rose (2012) explains the process as taking an image apart and locating how it operates in broader systems of meaning. This approach works when applied to websites as they are complex and linking up the signifiers over the site presents an analytic map. Verbal language is just one aspect of this system of signs; Koller argues it is 'one system of ideologically vested signs interacting with visual and material systems in complex ways' (2008, 398). This is highlighted when analysing online text as on the sites there was a blurring of verbal and visual communication on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The use of a wide range of emoticons is present within the girls' speech on both sites and these, in addition to verbal language are used to convey the full meaning of statements. The intertwined use of verbal and visual cues in the language use of girls on the site benefits from the combination of discourse and semiotic analysis. More broadly the use of visual imagery in combination with or alongside verbal or textual discourse to communicate ideas is well established. This presents an advantage of using a semiotic approach to analysing the websites because the visual nature of

the space is taken into analytic consideration with textual analysis to explore how they might strengthen, alter or explain each other.

Semiotic analysis has a history of being applied to the study of advertisements (see for examples Dyer, 1992, Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1997; Gill, 2007). In some ways the arguments for its relevance there mirror the reasoning for using semiotic analysis for this project. Barthes (1972) argues that advertising images are ideal to decode through semiotic analysis because they are constructed meticulously to communicate particular signs overtly. Through the same process of signification products can be read as signs too and a number of authors have discussed how our consumption signifies something of our social identity to wider society (see for example Berger, 2010). It is possible to apply these ideas to the exploration of *Stardoll* as a commercial website as it has been constructed in particular ways to appeal to both children and their parents.

Critiques of semiotic analysis focus on the extent to which, if at all, the signs encoded within images reflect, alter or influence behaviour or conceptions, however this is not the intention of semiotic analysis for this project. Instead through a semiotic analysis of tween spaces online the construction of these sites can be discussed. In applying the practices of semiotic analysis to *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side* the aim is as Penn argues to perform the 'valuable task of drawing attention to the constructed nature of the image' (Penn, 2000: 241). In using a semiotic approach with this project the ways a commercial children's website is explicitly and deliberately constructed in order to be consumed as a tween space can be interrogated. This analysis of commercial websites such as *Stardoll* allows

an exploration of adult constructed ideas of what is considered appropriate tween culture. Within this project *Stardoll* has been contrasted with an online space set up by and for tweens who are members of the *Stardoll* community. The deconstruction of *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* using semiotic analysis allows for the analysis of a tween space created by girls and in some kind of dialogue with *Stardoll*.

Taking a semiotic approach with this project presents the opportunity for mapping and analysis of the online sites created by *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, developing the exploration of broader discourses such as articulations of girlhood, childhood or celebrity culture. A semiotic approach has particular advantages for undertaking a cultural analysis of websites because of the amalgamation of visual and textual data in creating meaning. Furthermore *Stardoll* is a complex website with many interlinking areas and through semiotics the site could be deconstructed in a way that still retains the significance of the overall meaning.

### Discourse analysis

The study of discourse is an interdisciplinary and fractured field with numerous definitions of 'discourse' and approaches for studying it. However the broad notions of discourse analysis have had a methodological history of being applied to studying celebrity, celebrity culture and gender (Marshall, 1997 and van Zoonen, 1994), topic areas that this thesis seeks to address. Using discourse analysis approach allows for an exploration of the manner in which construction of these



discourse occurs. As Paltridge notes, 'discourse as the social construction of reality see texts as communicative units which are embedded in social and cultural practices' (2012:7). These discursive repertoires provide codes for understanding and interaction (Wetherell, 1995) when discursive patterns are shared they become social realities.

Modes of communication online require analysing more than the verbal utterances to fully understand the discursive interaction on the sites. For instance through the use of emoticons, mixing capital and lower case letters or using italics mean that often the intended meaning of the text can only be understood once these additional signs are analysed. Discourse analysis facilitates a historical dimension to the string of discussions that places the chronological context into consideration. This has particular resonance with two areas I analysed in depth, the blog posts on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* and the *Starblog* articles and discussion threads. As I discussed in this chapter the systematic data collection was conducted on archived areas of the websites, using discourses analysis on these focused data sets enabled an in-depth analysis. The interactions between the two tween online spaces also lend themselves to a discursive analysis as *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* was created in dialogue with *Stardoll*. I have explored how the context of speech online can be analysed through a combination of semiotic and discursive analysis, I now turn to a more detailed discussion of the discourse analysis approach.

### Thematic discourse analysis

The thematic discourse analysis for this project followed the approach set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). Their method directed the research process from the identification, analysis and reporting of discursive themes within the data. Much like the broader conceptions of discourse analysis there is little agreement defining thematic discourse analysis. Thematic discourse analysis aims to find patterns and themes within the whole data set as Braun and Clarke explain, 'a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (2006: 10). During stage one of the research process observations were noted potential themes on each website were outlined. Approaching the analysis in the manner meant that discursive themes could be identified throughout the sites and changes over time could be traced. Mapping the discursive themes was particularly beneficial for *Stardoll* because it helped to organise the complexity of the site.

Braun and Clarke (2006) critique the notion that themes emerge out of data and instead argue that the researcher should acknowledge the active role that they play in the constructing and identification of these themes. The framework for the project as an exploration of tween culture defined the boundaries of the research and this structure for my research guided the construction of themes. However the inductive approach to the first stage of the research process meant that the questions were (re)defined throughout the period of immersion. After choosing the areas and themes of the sites for the research the observation and collection of data was undertaken in a structured manner. The structured coding of thematic

analysis was a useful approach for specific areas of the sites that were text heavy, such as the girls' discussions on the *Starblog* and posts on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*.

### Coding process

An inductive approach was taken to defining the themes and coding the data. Taking an inductive approach meant that the themes could be drawn from the girls' discussions, giving their perspective and voice prominence. This approach also made sense considering that the content and style of the website was unknown prior to undertaking the research; therefore the process of observations and mapping, both in terms of space and thematically, provided a good starting point. In following the process of taking a thematic discourse analysis the entire data set was read before any systematic coding took place (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following this the data for this project was analysed using thematic discourse analysis. This drew on the observations and familiarity of the data set in order to create codes that accurately reflected the data. After reading through the data again notes were taken on themes and these were then grouped into codes and organised into a coding tree. The codes were organised into broad topic area themes depending on the data, for example 'Miley Cyrus' or 'fandom'. These were then followed by a series of sub themes such as age, gender, sexuality. All of the girls' discussions on the *Starblog* comment spaces and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* blog posts were analysed using Nvivo. The coding tree was altered as the analysis

progressed and new themes emerged. Almost all of these coding changes narrowed down the scope of the codes to be more focused. After coding all the discussion threads in this manner the data within each code was explored separately. Many of these codes were then further broken down into narrower, more specific categories. These were then clustered around the themes for the analytical chapters.

### **5.6.2. Analytic tools**

Drawing on traditional media studies approaches to analyse the data enabled an exploration of the textual and visual aspects of media within the websites. However these analytical techniques did not adequately explore the interactivity cultural spaces online. In order to analyse the way these spaces operate online I have drawn on a number of additional analytic tools to complement my examination of data from the two sites.

In borrowing Bakhtin's (2004) of speech genre the interactive nature of language on *Stardoll* was examined. Nystrand, discussing Bakhtin's approach, argues that 'discourse is essentially structured by the interaction of the conversants with each playing a particular social role' (1997: 8). Moreover Hirschkop suggests that 'language appears not as an indifferent medium of social exchange but as a form of social exchange, susceptible to political and moral evaluation like any other' (1989: 5). This alludes to Bakhtin's discussion of speech genres where he argues that 'each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types (of utterances)... these we may call speech genres' (2004: 60). Using Bakhtinian

approaches to language the intrinsic structuring of speech through dialogic framing and speech genres can be explored. However in order to discuss relations of power in the articulation of speech I have drawn on Foucauldian notions of discursive power in combination with Bakhtin's concept of speech genre. Foucault argues that 'we should admit that power produces knowledge... that power and knowledge directly imply one another' (1980: 27). I utilise this concept of discursive power in order to discuss how speech is productive.

Bourdieu's (1993) ideas of capital have been applied to a range of research areas and enables theorisation and analysis of non-monetary forms of power and influence. There are two particular concepts of capital that are useful for the analysis, social capital and moral capital. Social capital has been drawn on to theorise the interactions within online spaces (Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005 and Pfeil, Arjan and Zaphiris, 2009), often discussing the extent to which social capital is exchanged online and offline. Social capital concerns individuals' resources base of the links or networks and resources between individuals and has particular value for the project because of the way that social capital is drawn on by girls to position and legitimate their discussions. Utilising the concept of moral capital as an analytical tool the moral regulation of these spaces can be explored. Morality is a distinctive form of regulation, according to Valerde; she argues that it works at the level of the 'production of individual ethical subjectivity and the reproduction of the nation's moral capital' (2005: 187). Furthermore as negotiations of morality work to regulate cultural boundaries (Friedman, 2011), the concept of moral capital has potential for understanding how cultural boundaries are stated and undermined.

Drawing on these tools as part of my analysis enabled me to examine the sites as spaces for interaction and explore how interactions might be structured and governed using concepts of discursive power and capital. The combination of these analytical tools with traditional media studies approaches to deconstruction allowed me to theorise the websites as both a media construct and as an interactional space.

### **5.7.Conclusion**

In this chapter I have set out the methodological approach that I undertook with this project. Situating the research online I have suggested that the developing field of digital girlhood studies needs to rethink approaches to virtual research. As such the methodological discussion presented in this chapter is part of an emerging field of digital research. I propose that combining a cultural analysis of websites with ethnographic traditions, specifically immersion and mapping, enable a deeper understanding of online spaces as media texts that are inherently interactive. I examined a number of potential issues with undertaking website analysis, primarily the complexity and fluidity of websites and the use of web archives. I argued that the combination of approaches I used enabled me to grasp the complexity of the virtual spaces and trace the changes on the sites over time.

The ethical framework for this project draws together two fields of literature, online research and research with children. I discussed how a situational ethics approach is most appropriate for this project as the focus on each of the sites was chosen inductively, meaning that ethical considerations needed to be revised

throughout the research. Part of the re-examining of ethical concerns was whether the areas of the site constituted public or private spaces. In exploring how online sites complicate understandings of the distinction between public and private I argue that researchers should be sensitive to how spaces are used. I drew on discussions of how children's voices are represented in research, and shaped by decision to use direct quotations.

Finally in my approach to the analysis of the data I drew on traditional media studies and a number of analytic tools, such as notions of capital and speech genre. I argue that the interactive nature of websites mean that traditional approaches to analysing media do not engage with the way the websites are used. Instead I argue for an analytical framework drawing on discourse and semiotic analysis as well as analytic tools such as, speech genre, power and capital. The combination of a media studies approaches and context specific analytical tools enabled the full analysis of web spaces.

## **Chapter 6. (De) Constructing Stardolls: Interrogating the Construction of Tween Culture and Discourses of Tween Girlhood on *Stardoll***

### **6.1.Introduction**

In this chapter I draw on data from my research undertaken on *Stardoll* over the period 2012 – 2014 to present a cultural analysis of the site in order to investigate digital tween culture and discourses of tween femininity. In Chapter 4 I presented a map of the website *Stardoll*, detailing the layout of the site and providing an overview of the cultural space. My approach to the cultural analysis of the site was set out in Chapter 5 and I draw on both the semiotic and discursive elements of my analysis in this chapter.

This chapter has two functions, first to examine how *Stardoll* is constructed as an explicitly tween cultural space, and second to interrogate the tween femininity articulated within the space. I begin the chapter by analysing the digital bedroom culture constructed by *Stardoll*, discussing the semiotic design of the site, use of tween consumer culture and established aspects of girlhood culture. I argue that *Stardoll's* symbolic use of pink and other tween cultural artefacts positions girls within a commodified young femininity. I argue that *Stardoll* constructs an explicitly tween cultural space.



Having established *Stardoll* as a tween site I go on to examine the articulation of tween femininity within this space. I argue that there are three features to the kind of tween girlhood (re)produced on *Stardoll*; (1) consumer culture as a site for identity play, (2) the 'celebritisation' of the self within a participatory celebrity culture and (3) the discursive construction of girls as 'can do' (Harris, 2004), through opportunities for education and careers on the site. Drawing these three aspects together I argue that *Stardoll's* tween girlhood is situated within a Girl Power framed postfeminist, neoliberal discourse.

This chapter is contextualised within the established field of girlhood studies and in recent work theorising tween girlhood, set out in Chapter 2. In particular I draw on work exploring tween culture (Harris, 2005; Driscoll, 2005 and Coulter, 2005), and discourses of contemporary girlhood for example Harris' (2004) 'can do' girlhood and articulations of Girl Power as discussed by Taft (2004). I utilise a postfeminist, neoliberal framework as discussed by Gill and Scharff (2011) and Koffman and Gill (2013) outlined in Chapter 2, to analyse the location of contemporary tween girlhood on *Stardoll*.

## 6.2.Digital bedroom culture on *Stardoll*

### 6.2.1. *Stardoll*'s tween target audience

'The world's largest community site for girls' (2012)

'*Stardoll* is one of the few places on the Internet developed with an emphasis on girls' self-expression through fantasy and fashion play' (2012)

'fame, fashion and friends' (2012)

Figure 6-1 Quotes from *Stardoll*

*Stardoll* is defined as a cultural space for girls explicitly through their promotional material, a selection of which is shown in Figure 6.1 above. Their young and girly target audience is reinforced in the style and design of the site. In this section I examine the way that *Stardoll* discursively defines the site as a tween space exploring how *Stardoll* signifies gender and age on the site drawing on Harris' (2005) definition of tween culture as discussed in Chapter 2.

*Stardoll*'s intended tween audience is explicitly evoked in the quotations presented in Figure 6.1 above, where the use of the term 'girls' is prolific. *Stardoll* as a particularly gendered space is articulated by drawing on a cultural discourse of girlhood centred around interests in fashion, fame and friendship reflecting

established aspects of offline girl culture. Moreover, *Stardoll's* claim in the first quotation to be the 'world's largest community site for girls' (2012) defines the space as part of a digital global girl culture and reflects Harris' (2005) argument that tween culture is a global phenomenon.

As discussed in Chapter 3 there has been some exploratory research examining online girl culture and the use of virtual doll play (Reid-Walsh, 2007, Willett, 2007 and Spina-Caza, 2010). *Stardoll's* premise as a virtual paper doll dress up website digitalises traditional gendered divisions of play and evokes the culturally significant figure of the doll as central to girlhood play. Caldera and Sciaraffa (1998) argue that doll play is associated with feminine behaviour or roles such as nurturing and caregiving. However, as I examine in this chapter, doll play on *Stardoll* has been reconstituted as a site for (postfeminist) gendered identity play rather than nurturing or caregiving. I go on to examine the significance of *Stardoll's* use of dolls within a consumer culture as a site for tween identity expression later in this chapter. The use of dolls on *Stardoll* is intrinsic to the design and navigation of the site. The website's name, *Stardoll*, identification of avatars on the site as 'MeDolls', and the use of the term 'doll' to refer to members themselves, evokes notions of gendered play. In addition the significance of dress-up games available to play on the site mirrors offline doll play.

Whilst *Stardoll's* data on their users suggest that the majority of members range from seven to seventeen (Stardoll, 2012) the site is positioned towards the younger end of the age range. *Stardoll* define the site as tween age through their language choices such as 'play' and 'friends' as seen in the quotations in Figure 6.1 above,

marking the space as young. In addition the focus on identity play and self-expression evoke a playful tween audience, for example the quotation in Figure 6.1 suggests that *Stardoll* enables 'girls' self-expression through fantasy and fashion play'. As discussed in Chapter 3 while children's cultures are increasingly segmented by gender and age (Buckingham, 2011), research has suggested that children participate in practices of reading up or down (Willett, 2009 and Reid-Walsh, 2007). However whilst girls' uses of virtual spaces might be complex across sites with different intended age groups, in this chapter I am interested in how *Stardoll* is constructed as a tween cultural space.

*Stardoll's* language in the statements in Figure 6.1 above define the space as part of a global tween culture and evoke particular forms of tween femininity, which I interrogate in this chapter. In the following sections I examine *Stardoll's* development of a digital girlhood culture, the design of the site as part of the pinkification of girlhood and the use of tween consumer culture to examine how the site is signified as a tween cultural space.

### 6.2.1. Digitalising bedroom culture: *Stardoll's* uses of established offline girl culture

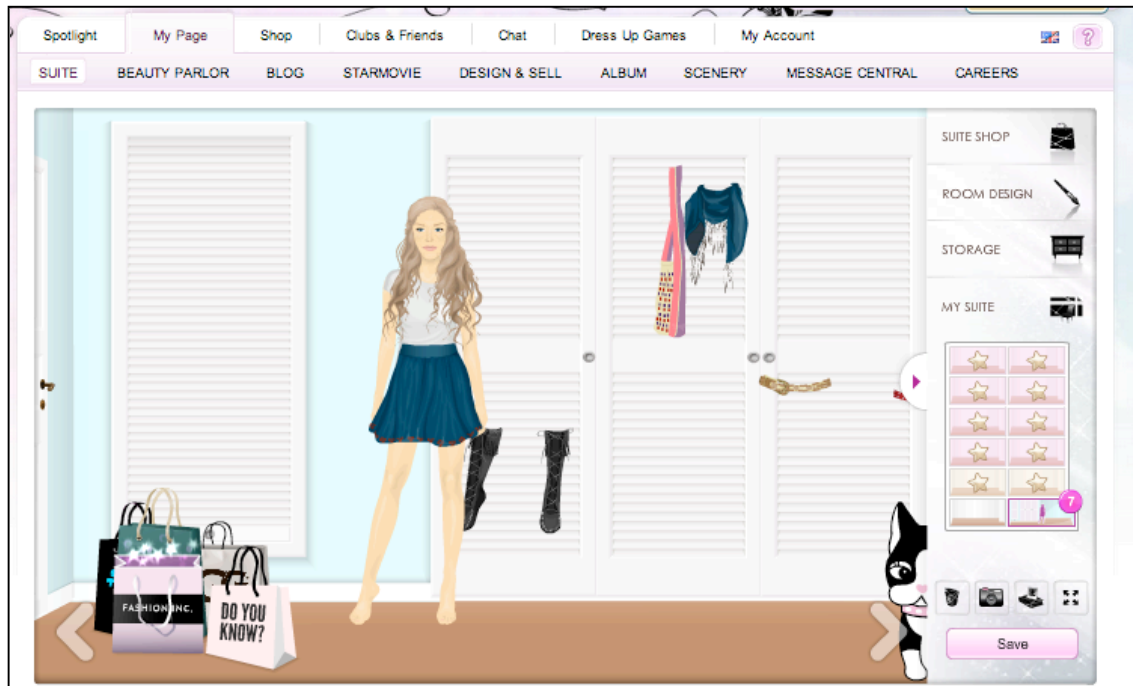


Figure 6-2 Screen shot of Stardoll suite (members' own page)

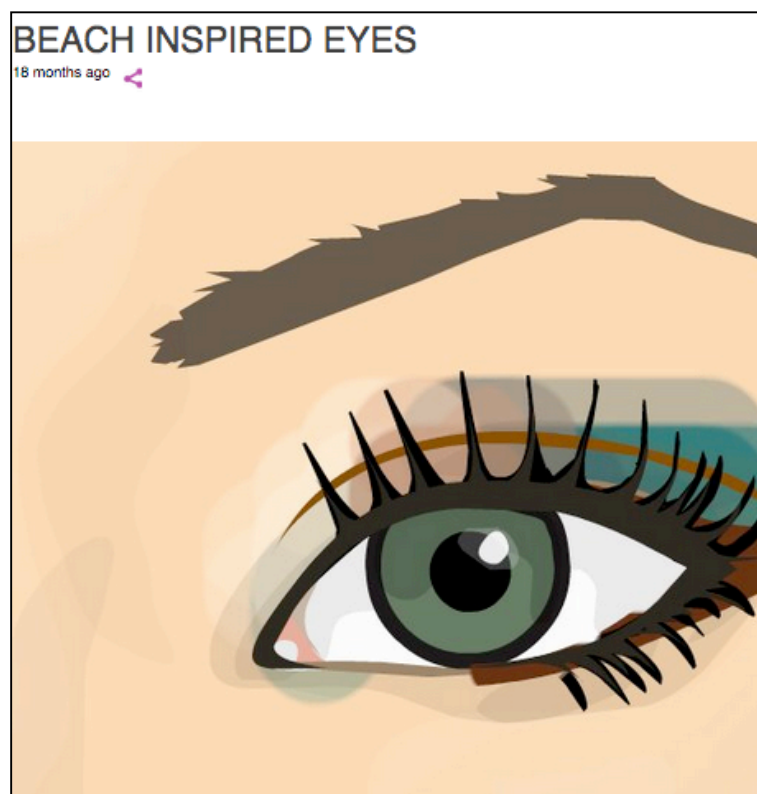


Figure 6-3 Screen shot of beauty blog post 'Beach inspired eyes'

Ok, so today I am going to do a quick eye-makeup tutorial inspired by the soft tones of the beach. To re-create this look you will need.

- 1 shade of light yellow eyeshadow
- 1 shade of aqua eyeshadow
- 1 shade of light brown eyeshadow
- a brown liquid liner
- black / brown lengthening mascara (optional)

After you have got them you can get started! It's really quick and simple! First apply your light yellow eyeshadow to your inner lid. Then blend the brown into that and apply it over the middle of your lid. Now all you need to do is pretty much repeat the steps with the aqua on your outer lid and apply the liquid liner. To do this apply a little to the outer lid and waterline and add a little flick. To finish off you can apply some lengthening mascara if you would like. I hope you like the look,  
Lay-Cey x

Figure 6-4 Text from beauty blog post 'Beach inspired eyes'

*Stardoll's* reproduction of girls' bedroom space is explicit; members are presented with their own bedroom suite with wardrobes, make up table and sofa, a screen shot of a suite on *Stardoll* is illustrated in Figure 6-2. The suite operates as the avatar's homepage on the site. Members' suites can be personalised through purchasing goods in the Starplaza, creating items and buying them in the Starbazaar or using promotional free gifts. The suite and MeDoll avatar are the only aspects of the website that can be personalised.

The design, style and activities on *Stardoll* mirror established aspects of offline girlhood culture. As I outlined in Chapter 3 the framing of girls' activities online as part of a 'digital bedroom culture' has been part of the emerging field of digital girlhood studies (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008 and Baker, 2011). Reid-Walsh and Mitchell revisit McRobbie and Garber's (1976) notion of girls' bedroom culture through their analysis of girls' personalized websites and argue that these digital spaces are part of a 'virtual bedroom culture' (2004: 174). The reproduction of

bedroom culture is explicit on *Stardoll*. As I go on to discuss *Stardoll* virtualises many aspects of girl culture.

The analysis of girls' magazines has been a site for academic research within girlhood studies (Griffin, 1982; McRobbie, 1978; Frazer, 1987). Researchers have examined the discourses of femininity in girls' magazines (Schlenker et al, 1998), the ways that magazines operate as spaces to learn to 'do femininity' (Kehily, 1999) and how girls mediate these images (Duke and Kreshel, 1998). Further research has explored how magazines may be key sources for sexual knowledge (Garner et al, 1998) and as sources for heteronormative socialization (Ostermann and Keller-Cohen, 1998). *Stardoll* reflects a similar scope and tone of traditional girls' magazines. In this section I discuss how the content of *Stardoll* reflects the emphasis on beauty and fashion in girls' magazines.

The process of learning fashion and beauty practices are presented as enjoyable on *Stardoll* in frequent articles and adverts giving girls advice and tips. *Stardoll's* fashion and beauty blog posts often use language that evokes a process of learning such as 'tutorials' and 'practice'. *Stardoll's* emphasis on beauty and fashion advice, which is framed as part of girls' leisure time on the site positions tween girlhood as postfeminist, where girls can enjoy participating in feminine activities (Lazor, 2005). The style and content of the fashion or beauty posts present a space for learning how to do tween femininity on *Stardoll*. In these articles the readers' tween girlhood is positioned as becoming, reflecting their location between childhood and adolescence, and *Stardoll's* position as a tween site. For example the article shown in Figure 6-3 and Figure 6.4 explains how to get 'beach eyes' by using various make-

## Chapter 6 - (De) Constructing Stardolls: Interrogating the Construction of Tween Culture and Discourses of Tween Girlhood on *Stardoll*

up products. The blogger introduces the tutorial by assuming that readers will want to re-create the look and situates the blog space as a site for learning. *Stardoll's* beauty and fashion advice operates as a manual for girls learning how to do tween girlhood on the site, however this advice is also directed at girls' behaviours and girlhood practices offline. For example while the image in the article is a computer-generated image the accompanying tutorial can be applied to girls on *Stardoll* or offline.<sup>1</sup> In digitalising these aspects of girl culture in magazines *Stardoll* articulates particular forms of tween femininity and reflects magazines' function as sites for learning how 'to do femininity'.

### 6.2.2. The 'pinkification' of tween girlhood: a semiotic analysis of *Stardoll*

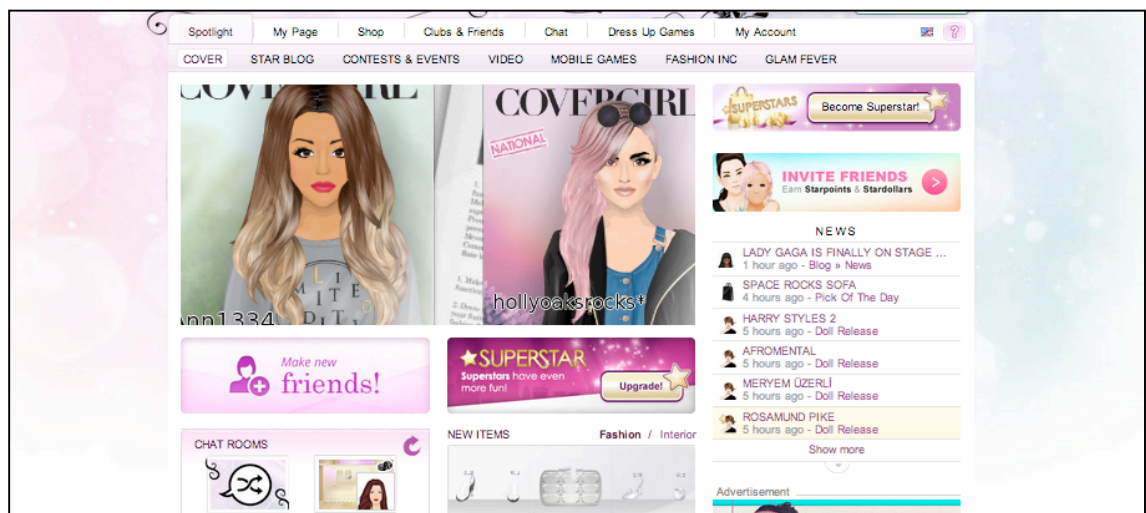


Figure 6-5 Screen shot from *Stardoll's* homepage

<sup>1</sup> Across the site *Stardoll's* advice blurs the boundaries of online and offline consumption a theme I return to throughout this chapter.



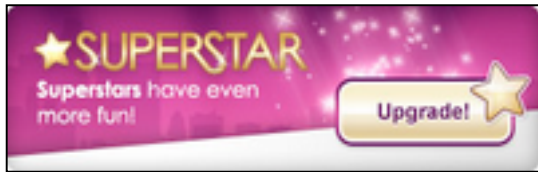


Figure 6-6 Advert for upgrading to Superstar membership

In this section I interrogate the visual construction of *Stardoll* and argue that the design of the site defines the space as distinctly tween. The standard background hues on *Stardoll* are shades of soft pink, lilac and baby blue and throughout the site text is usually a combination of purple, darker pink and black. The screen shot shown in Figure 6-5 illustrates the general look of the site with pale colours used for the backdrop and brighter colours highlighting different features or areas. Some features of the site are frequently highlighted, for example the option to upgrade to Superstar membership, shown in Figure 6-6 above. Often these aspects of the site are emphasised by using gold or bright pink colours, as in the example above, ensuring that they stand out against the paler pink and lilac backdrop. When entering and navigating around the space the site predominantly uses pink in various shades and combinations. Drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen's argument that 'signs that are motivated in their constitution by the interests of the makers of the signs, and not at all arbitrary or anarchic' (2002: 345), I argue that *Stardoll's* use of colour creates a purposefully distinctly gendered space for tween girls.

Koller argues that, 'the basic function of the colour is to denote something as feminine' (2008: 410). However pink can be used to distinguish a range of femininities (Gleeson and Frith, 2004) depending on the hue, saturation and colour

combination. I argue here that *Stardoll's* choice to construct the site in hues of pink marks the space as part of a distinctive tween girlhood culture.

The use of various shades of pastel colours for the website's background, illustrated in Figure 6.5 above, indicates a young femininity. The soft, pale colours evoke notions of sexual innocence and vulnerability, reflecting a Romantic conception of childhood discussed in Chapter 2. Moreover the use of bubbles and sparkles faded into the pastel coloured background gives the impression of glitter, illustrating Harris' argument that tween culture is identifiable through the use of, 'fluffy, glittery, sparkle and shimmery objects and fashions, and the use of words like "princess" "fairy" and of course "girl"' (2005: 212). The use of bubbles and glitter for the background of the site illustrated in Figure 6.5 above draw on Harris' significations of tween culture and are replicated across the site with *Stardoll's* use of flowers, diamonds and hearts. The combination of visual cues marking *Stardoll* as a young girls' cultural space reflects Harris' argument that tween culture is marked by age and gender. The prolific use of pink on *Stardoll* situates the site within the contemporary pinkification of girlhood and associated concerns emerging from this cultural location.

#### Concerns with the pinkification of girlhood

Contemporary gendered colour choice, pink for girls and blue for boys, can be traced to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, although associations between colour and gender have a longer history (Cunningham and Macrae, 2011 and Koller, 2008). While appropriate contemporary boys' colours have diversified to include a range of colours other than blue, Koller (2008) suggests that pink is used to distinguish and

signify a feminine identity from an early age. In Kearney's (2010) analysis of the changing and complex meanings of pink over time she argues that the overwhelming use of pink in young girls' cultures means that it is difficult to appropriate it for different meanings. Instead she argues that, 'pink is not a natural colour to which we can freely ascribe whatever meaning we want... it is very difficult to associate it with anything other than female and femininity' (2010:29). Furthermore analysing the use of pink in breast cancer awareness campaigns Johansen et al. discuss the symbolic impact of pink 'as *the* female colour' (2013: 143, emphasis original). Moreover, within the cultural context of postfeminism pink takes on new significance and meaning. Koller (2008) argues that there has been a shift from perceiving pink as naïve and within traditional notions of femininity to associations with a postfeminist femininity where pink is a celebratory signifier of girls' empowerment, independence, fun and choice.

However recently the pinkification of girl culture has been framed as problematic and has been criticised. Public commentary has largely been focused on articulating concerns with the use of pink within commercial girlhood and has not problematised colour choices for boys in the same way. Concerns with the pinkification of girls' culture draw together two discourses of girlhood in crisis: the commercialisation of childhood and the sexualisation of girls as discussed in Chapter 2.

Media commentary, public campaigns such as Pinkstinks and Let Toys Be Toys, as well as the Government commissioned Letting Children be Children review (Bailey, 2011) have emerged as significant voices in the articulation of this discourse.

Within media commentary the pinkification of girlhood has been linked to reinforcing gender stereotypes (Porter, 2012), limiting girls' choices (Freeman, 2009) and putting them off mathematics and science (Mctague, 2014). Recent concerns with the pinkification of girlhood have been amplified by claims that wearing pink clothing negatively impacts girls' futures (Perry, 2014). These concerns with the pinkification of girlhood are reflected in the campaigns such as Pinkstinks and Let Toys Be Toys. Pinkstinks argue that 'there's more than one way to be a girl' (2014) and raise concern with the narrow discourses of a commodified girlhood offered through pinkification where young femininity is focused on beauty and caring. Similar anxieties with pinkification were illustrated in Letting Children Be Children (2011), outlined in Chapter 2, where the pinkification of girlhood was framed within concerns for the sexualisation of girls. This approach displaced parents' worries about a gendered consumer culture and repositioned them within the sexualisation of girls discourse. Anxieties about the pinkification of girlhood have become a mechanism to articulate concerns about particular products and forms of consumption practices, often with a moral undertone.

In this section I have argued that the design of *Stardoll* constructs the website as a distinctively tween cultural space. I have discussed how *Stardoll's* design reflects Koller's (2008) argument that pink is used to signify particular forms of femininity. I have examined how the primary use of light, pastel colours on the site denotes the space as young and feminine. However these colours are used along with brighter shades of pink, suggesting a postfeminist positioning in which girls' empowerment is celebrated. The combined use of these hues on *Stardoll* reflects the tween's

## Chapter 6 - (De) Constructing Stardolls: Interrogating the Construction of Tween Culture and Discourses of Tween Girlhood on *Stardoll*

position as in between childhood and adolescence. Furthermore the pinkification of *Stardoll* situates the site within broader anxieties over the commercialisation and sexualisation of contemporary tween girlhood.

### 6.2.3. Embedded consumer culture on *Stardoll*: signifying tween spaces

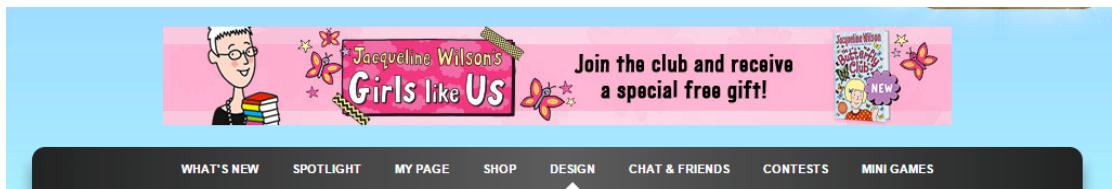


Figure 6-7 Banner advert displayed on *Stardoll*



Figure 6-8 Advert on *Stardoll*

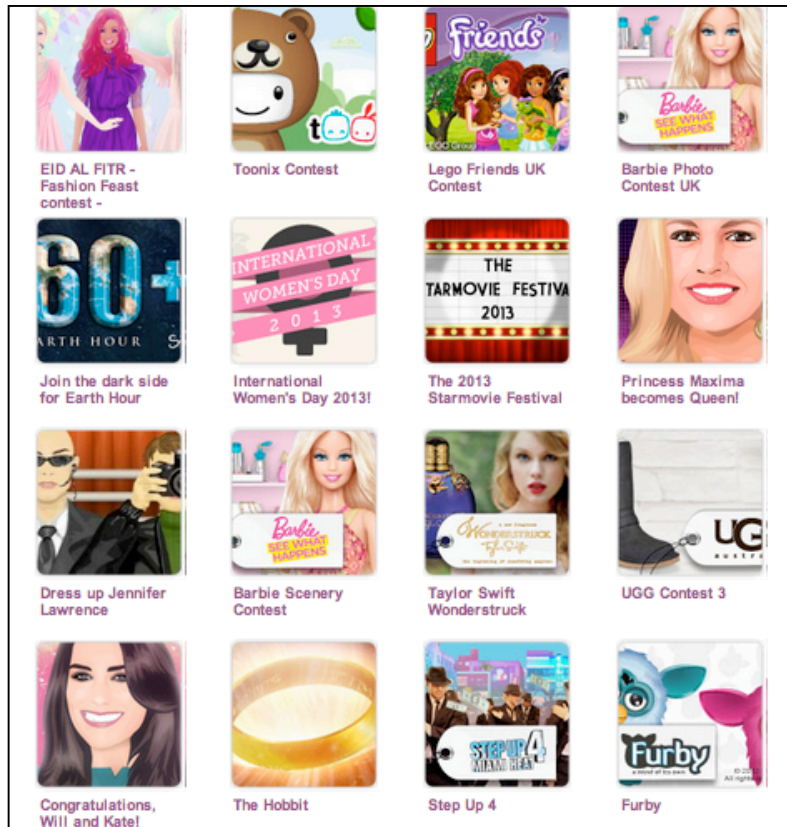


Figure 6-9 Screen shot of the contests page on Stardoll

Throughout *Stardoll* consumer culture plays a central role in defining the space as tween. Driscoll (2005) argues that tween identity is defined by participation in a particular form of culture and in this section I examine how the advertising, advergaming, which combines play and advertising, and product placement on *Stardoll* constructs girls' play within a tween commercial space.

*Stardoll* uses direct and indirect advertising techniques on the site. Direct advertisements on *Stardoll* are displayed on banners, site skins (the background of the website), along the side bar and embedded within the tile design of the homepage. These adverts frequently change to reflect current promotions. An example of a banner is shown in Figure 6-7 above advertising Jacqueline Wilson's book 'Girls like us'. The variety of spaces for advertising on *Stardoll* means that

readers are immersed different forms of advertising across the site. An additional effect of the immersion in advertising means the look and 'feel' of *Stardoll* is fluid because it is constantly shifting.

Generally *Stardoll's* explicit advertising is age appropriate for the site's intended tween audience.<sup>2</sup> The Lil-Lets advert in Figure 6-8 above is a clear example of *Stardoll's* age appropriate advertising where the choice of language such as 'girls', 'smaller' and 'teens' points to young girls as the intended audience. The colours used in the advert further reinforce this and reflect the pastel pink and lilac tones of the site, which as I already discussed in this chapter, evoke notions of young femininity. Furthermore the use of heart imagery both on the product packaging and in the advert positions the intended audience as young and feminine.

Indirect advertising is embedded in the design of *Stardoll* in multiple ways, through sponsored games, quizzes, clubs or virtual products. *Stardoll's* immersive advertising begins when a member creates their avatar and they are presented with a set of complementary clothes. At the time of conducting the research the clothes were sponsored by the Disney tween television show *Hannah Montana* and reflected the style of clothing worn on the show. Members receive additional branded products and clothing during promotions, from entering competitions and achieving higher levels of membership.

On *Stardoll* the boundary between advertising and participation in the consumer based play on the site is blurred. For example the advert for Jacqueline Wilson's

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<sup>2</sup> I examine the girls' negotiations of what constitutes 'tween appropriate' advertising in Chapter 7 in my analysis of their blog, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*.

book 'Girls like us' illustrated in the banner advert above, entices members to join the Jacqueline Wilson Fan Club on *Stardoll* by offering a free gift - a virtual t-shirt for girls' *Stardoll* avatars depicting the book's logo. The interlinking of advertising and play on the site in similar ways to this is frequent. Moreover this example illustrates how consumer culture on *Stardoll* blurs the boundaries between advertising and member created content. For example official branded clubs, such as the Jacqueline Wilson club advertised, and girls' member created clubs co-exist within the same spaces.

Indirect advertising is also tween age appropriate and signifies *Stardoll* as a tween space. Figure 6-9 above illustrates a range of contests on *Stardoll* and features a number of brands and specific products such as Furby, Taylor Swift, Barbie, UGG and Lego Friends. These products and brands feature here as significant aspects of a gendered and aged offline tween culture and blur the boundaries between advertising and play, termed 'advergaming' (Buckingham, 2011), on the site. 'Advergaming' invites members of the site to actively participate and engage with brands or brand values represented on *Stardoll*.





Figure 6-10 Screen shot of Barbie Photo Contest on Stardoll

One such recurrent series of advergames on *Stardoll*, the Barbie Photo Contest, demonstrates the construction of consumer-based play. A screen shot of the contest is shown in Figure 6-10. To enter the contest members must start a 'party', which is a chat room, on *Stardoll* hosted in Barbie's virtual Dream House. Members are then asked to invite their friends to the party and take a photo of their tea party in Barbie's house to enter the competition. Reflecting *Stardoll*'s focus on fashion the competition encourages girls to dress up their avatars in 'dresses fit for royalty' (Stardoll, 2013). While the girls are at the party in Barbie's Dream House adverts for the latest Barbie products automatically play on the

screen. Entrance into the competition is rewarded as each member receives a virtual Barbie tea set that they can display in their suite. As members have to purchase decorations for their suites, entering competitions to receive products is an alternative way of personalising their space on the site. The winner of the competition receives Stardollars, these give members purchasing power in *Stardoll's* virtual shopping centres to buy clothes or accessories for their avatar or furnishings for their suites. The Stardollar reward, often the prize for winning competitions, is significant because it reinforces participation in *Stardoll's* consumer culture as a goal of play on the site. The Barbie Photo Contest and other similar advergames on the site, illustrate the integration of different media texts within *Stardoll's* virtual world where participation with consumer culture and brand values is seamlessly integrated into the features of *Stardoll*.

The tween consumer wallpaper discussed in this section forms the backdrop to *Stardoll's* virtual space. The saturated use of consumer culture is significant because it frames girls' play on the site as play within consumerism. The consumer based play on *Stardoll* reflects Coutler (2005) and Harris' (2005) argument that tween culture is rooted in consumerism. *Stardoll's* virtual shopping centres become the site for tweendom online. Following on from this discussion I go on to explore how the tween consumer culture on *Stardoll* positions girls' demonstrations of their identity through their consumer purchases in the following section.

In the discussion thus far I have argued that a number of cultural significations are used by *Stardoll* to define the site as part of distinctly tween culture. I explored how *Stardoll* draws on established offline themes, products/ brands and styles of

girlhood culture. In doing so I have discussed how age and gender are explicit in the articulation of tween culture, a theme I continue to explore throughout this thesis. I have begun to examine *Stardoll's* articulations of tween girlhood in their construction of the site as a tween cultural space and I build on this discussion in the following sections.

### **6.3. Becoming *Stardolls*: tween femininity on *Stardoll***

I now shift the focus of the discussion to investigate *Stardoll's* articulation of tween femininity examining three aspects, (1) tween identity based in consumer play, (2) a participatory celebrity culture and (3) the discursive construction of girls as 'can do girls' (Harris, 2004) through education and career opportunities.

**6.3.1. Becoming *Stardolls*: consumer based play and the construction of tween identity on *Stardoll***

*Stardoll's* premise as a virtual doll dress up website places consumer culture at the centre of the site and most activities available on *Stardoll* revolve around play with and within a consumer culture. For example - the range of games with a dress up theme, time spent making modifications to avatars/ suites and shopping in the virtual shopping centres. Both *Stardoll's* framing of consumption as a site for leisure and the situating of tween play within consumer culture on the site are reflected in definitions of tween culture, which I outlined in Chapter 2. I have already discussed *Stardoll's* use of tween product placement, 'advergaming' and the proliferation of adverts within the space. However in this section I examine the articulation of tween girlhood as a product of consumption on *Stardoll*, achieved through girls' identity play on the site.

‘Make your Stardoll: It can look like you or whoever you want to be!’

‘The Starplaza is Stardoll’s glittering complex of stores and celebrity boutiques, the number one on-site destination for all your virtual lifestyle needs’

‘Express your style, or try something entirely new!’

‘Totally unique, over 60 billion possible variations!’

Figure 6-11 Quotes from Stardoll

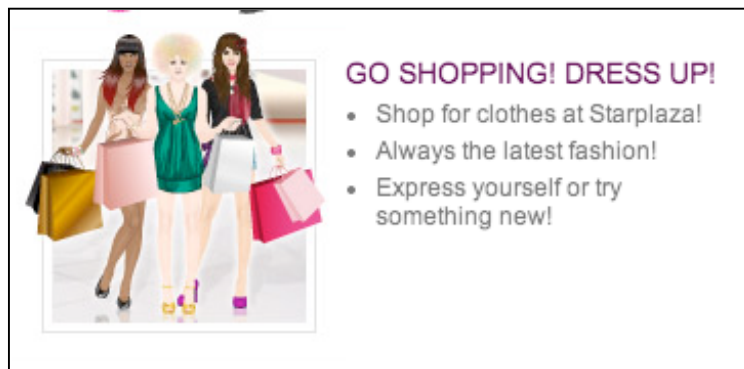


Figure 6-12 Advert for Stardoll

## Chapter 6 - (De) Constructing Stardolls: Interrogating the Construction of Tween Culture and Discourses of Tween Girlhood on *Stardoll*

### DANCE ATTITUDE STYLED OUTFITS


71 months ago • 3274 comment(s)

Revival -- Making a comeback to the shelves and the catwalk is the not-to-be missed 80's themed 'Dance Attitude' look!!

Whether you're a prima ballerina, or a sexy tango champion, or a can-can dancer, be sure to be foot loose and willing to shake your bon-bon ... and you'll definitely have fun with the Dance Attitude style!

Innovative and spunky, this look is inspired by the 80's fashion era for courageous Stardolls who want to express their creativity and individuality.

In a decade of big hair, was big attitude. Now we remixed the style, inspired by the electronic music scene including unusual mixes of eclectic colors and spandex leggings with loud patterns.



It's all about layering -think FAME! And by that we mean off-shoulder sweatshirts, leotards, leggings, leg warmers and sweat bands -- it's sporty, it's dance, and its definitely aerobics inspired.

Dance Attitude style is about being bold - and not just with your clothes, add big hair, bright make up, and jazzy jewellery to complete the look.

Get involved and be ready to bust a major 80's fashion move!

Figure 6-13 'Dance Attitude Styled Outfits' article on Stardoll

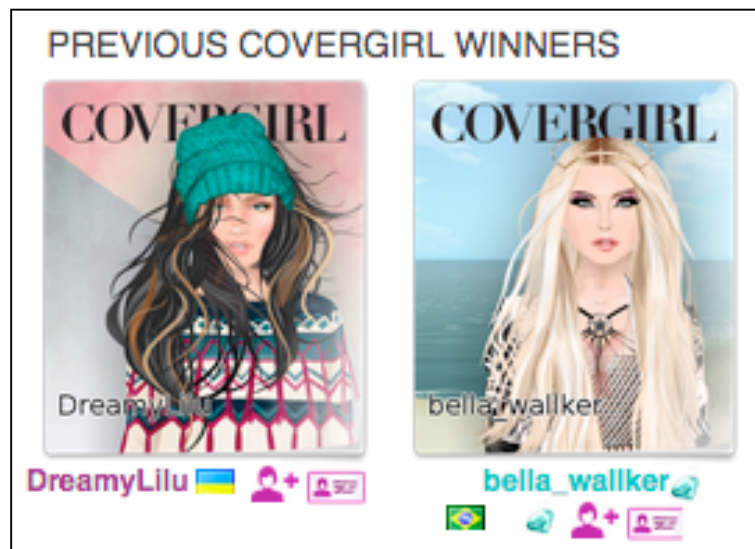


Figure 6-14 Screen shot of previous Covergirl winners

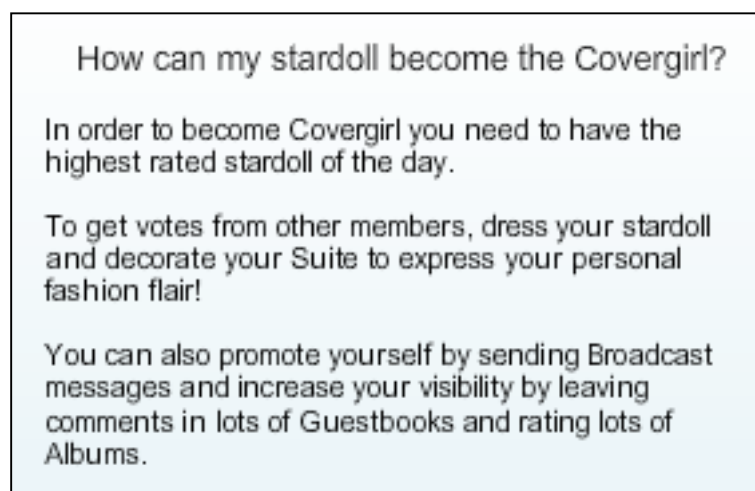


Figure 6-15 Stardoll's advice for members wanting to become a Covergirl

Identity play on *Stardoll* begins when members set up their account. In the creation of their *Stardoll* avatar girls can design a virtual self to, 'look like you or whoever you want to be!' *Stardoll's* playful attitude towards girls' identity creation on the site is replicated across the space, for example dress up games are central features of activities. This playful participation in consumerism is central to *Stardoll's* articulations of tween girlhood on the site. Time spent playing dress up games or

browsing the virtual malls on *Stardoll* is articulated as an enjoyable use of leisure time. This is contrasted with opportunities for education and careers that are framed as productive, which I examine later in this chapter.

Figure 6-12 is an advert for members to join *Stardoll*, displayed on the homepage of the website. In this advert shopping is visually presented as a group activity as three *Stardoll* avatars are pictured together with their shopping bags. *Stardoll's* use of language in this advert frames shopping as a leisure activity on the site as they combine going shopping with dressing up. This positions the act of buying clothes as playful and fun because it is 'dress up' and the term evokes notions of a youthful femininity. The choice of the term 'dress up' on this advert also refers to the paperdoll premise of the site. The tween self that is in the process of being (re) produced through consumer based play on *Stardoll* supports Brookes and Kelly's argument that 'the tweenie self can be understood as being, to a significant extent an artefact of consumption' (2009: 600). *Stardoll's* articulation of consumer culture mirrors discourses of Girl Power that promise 'an all female world of fun, sassiness and dressing up to please your (girl) self' (Griffin, 2004: 33). On *Stardoll* the online avatar and the offline tween girl, through beauty and fashion advice that seeps out of the site, are situated as identity projects that are created by and achieved through consumerism in the virtual and offline world.

*Stardoll's* positioning of tween girls within the terrain of a playful consumer culture on the site emphasises girls' individuality as an important aspect of their identity work and positions their consumer based activities as empowering. I explore each of these in turn.



Within the articulation of girls' playful practices of consumption *Stardoll* highlights opportunities on the site for girls' to express their individuality. The fourth quotation in Figure 6-11 above communicates the significance of individuality to identity play on *Stardoll*, where they mention the '60 billion possible variations' in girls' creation of *Stardoll* avatars. Furthermore the second quote in Figure 6-11 illustrates the importance of individuality in girls' identity play on the site. This quotation is from an advert for the Starplaza where girls are told they can shop to express their style or try out different identities on the site. Discourses of individuality are frequently referred to in relation to fashion, for example the article 'dance attitude style outfits' in Figure 6-13 is typical of fashion or style articles on *Stardoll*. The author suggests that members who want to express their individuality and creativity should try out a 'dance attitude' look. Members can achieve 'the look' by buying make up and clothes, which as pointed out in the article are 'back on the shelves'. The author suggests that there is space within the genre of 'dance attitude' for members to create their own individuality. These examples demonstrate *Stardoll's* emphasis on the importance of individuality within the consumer culture offered on the site. *Stardoll's* articulation of consumerism and individuality where girls can create their identities in relation to the brands/products reflects Willett's argument that 'mainstream culture becomes about maintaining a distinct cultural identity' (2008: 56). Girls' individualised identity play on *Stardoll* is framed as an opportunity for them to create their own identity projects that are similar to Tincknell's (2011) and Koffman and Gill's (2013) discussions of 'choice biographies', which are part of a postfeminist neoliberal culture where entrepreneurial individuals work on their 'self projects'.

Moreover individuality is often the desirable outcome of fashion play on *Stardoll*. For example *Stardoll* run a 'Covergirl' competition each day where the winner is featured on the homepage of the site. An advert for the Covergirl competition is shown in Figure 6-14. To enter the competition members need to be voted in by other *Stardoll* users, in order to get votes *Stardoll* suggests girls 'dress your Stardoll and decorate your Suite to express your personal fashion flair' to get voted as Covergirl. This example illustrates how individuality is an integral and prized aspect of *Stardoll's* articulation of a consumer based girlhood.

The power afforded to girls on *Stardoll* is through their financial capital to create their identity/ identities through participation in the virtual consumer culture on offer. Girls' participation in consumer culture on *Stardoll* is framed as a demonstration of their empowered status on the site. The consumer based empowerment on offer to girls on *Stardoll* supports Taft's (2004) discussion of Girl Power discourses, where girls' are offered choice as agentful social actors and their potential power is formulated within the power to consume. The use of consumer culture as a framework to demonstrate empowerment on *Stardoll* mirrors the use of consumerism within postfeminist culture, where women's consumption is presented as evidence of feminist gains (see for example Negra, 2004, Fairclough, 2008 and Gill, 2008). Furthermore girls' participation in *Stardoll's* consumer culture is enacted as part of a public display of success on the site, as their range (or lack of) consumer choice is displayed on their avatar and in their suite. Therefore the bodies of girls' avatars and individuals' suites on *Stardoll* are sites to display symbols of consumption. Girls' public display of consumption reinforces that

success on the site is defined through their ability to participate in consumer culture. The framework of success on *Stardoll* reflects Harris' (2005) argument that within neoliberal postfeminism girls' success is confirmed by their ability to consume. Drawing on the dichotomous rhetoric of children' consumption as either empowered or exploited, set out in Chapter 2, *Stardoll* positions tween girls as empowered consumers who are able to take up opportunities express their identity through consumer culture on the site. However there are significant financial access barriers to girls' participation in *Stardoll's* consumerism, as girls need an income of Stardollars, which are real economic transactions. These inequalities in girls' access to participation in *Stardoll's* consumer culture are masked by discourses of individualism and empowerment that celebrate girls' identity play.

Discourses of consumer culture on *Stardoll* articulate particular practices and ways 'to do' girlhood, as such the tween self is created and (re) defined through consumer play on *Stardoll*. These formations of tween girlhood operate within a postfeminist and neoliberal framework, where individuality is emphasised and girls' empowerment is articulated as consumer based power, reflecting Harris' argument that girls are positioned as ideal consumers 'via a problematic knitting together of feminist and neoliberal ideology about power and opportunities' (2004: 165).

### **6.3.2. Creating a participatory celebrity culture on *Stardoll*: The 'celebritisation' of the tween self**

The focus on celebrity culture is the second aspect of *Stardoll's* articulation of tween girlhood that I explore in this chapter. Young girls' consumption of celebrity culture has been a topic of interest within the field of girlhood studies (see for example Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs, 2003, McRobbie and Garber, 1975, Lowe, 2004 and Wolf, 2007). However the significance of celebrity culture within the emerging field of digital girlhood studies has yet to be examined in detail. On the one hand celebrity culture on *Stardoll* replicates established forms of celebrity gossip, however the site also reworks celebrity culture so that girls themselves form part of a participatory celebrity space.

I begin this section by examining how *Stardoll* reproduce frameworks of celebrity gossip and explore how their relocation in new media ecologies may present different opportunities for girls' consumption in online spaces. I go on to investigate how celebrity culture has been reconstituted on *Stardoll* through a participatory framework and the 'celebritisation' of the self where tween girls are offered the opportunity to become celebrities within the site.

### **6.3.2.1. *Established formats of celebrity culture on Stardoll***

As outlined in Chapter 4 the *Starblog* is primarily a celebrity gossip blog,<sup>3</sup> which reproduces established formats, styles and content of celebrity gossip. The blog is laid out as a series of articles published by *Stardoll* staff and attached are comment spaces where members can post comments. In Chapter 7 I examine the production of Cyrus' tween celebrity and the girls' responses in the comment threads in greater detail. However in this chapter I focus the discussion on the general function of the *Starblog* as part of *Stardoll's* celebrity culture.

The *Starblog* reproduces established formats of celebrity gossip magazines where celebrity news is reported within notions of 'tween appropriate', which I discuss in the following chapter. *Stardoll's* approach to celebrity gossip is distinct from other online spaces that have demonstrated a shift in format and style from offline production of celebrity. For example analysing Perez Hilton's<sup>4</sup> blog Peterson (2007) argues that bloggers expose the mechanisms of the celebrity industry and operate as new sites for the production of celebrity, however the *Starblog* does not undertake these functions. Similarly the *Starblog* does not draw attention to the constructed nature of celebrities (to see examples of this look at Fairclough's (2008) work on Hilton's blog and Holmes' (2005) analysis of Heat Magazine. However resituating established formats of celebrity production and consumption in online spaces present new ways for engaging in celebrity consumption. The comment

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<sup>3</sup> The *Starblog's* emphasis shifted towards the end of the period I studied *Stardoll*, moving from a general celebrity gossip blog to focus on fashion and celebrity culture.

<sup>4</sup> Perez Hilton is a well known celebrity blogger, he blogs at PerezHilton.com.

spaces attached to each article present girls with a space for instantaneous peer-to-peer commentary within a global tween culture in their consumption of celebrity. I examine girls' use of these spaces in detail in Chapter 7.

#### **6.3.2.2. *Stardoll's participatory celebrity culture***

Celebrity culture on *Stardoll* is not confined to the *Starblog*, instead discourses of celebrity permeate the site. Activities on *Stardoll* are often framed within celebrity culture, for example, creating celebrity avatars, shopping to get a 'celebrity look' and celebrity themed mini games, which invite girls to participate in celebrity culture. In this section I examine two features of the site that demonstrate *Stardoll's* participatory celebrity culture, the mini game Celebrity Snapshot (2013) and the Starstruck promotion (2013).

Celebrity Snapshot: girls' play within celebrity culture

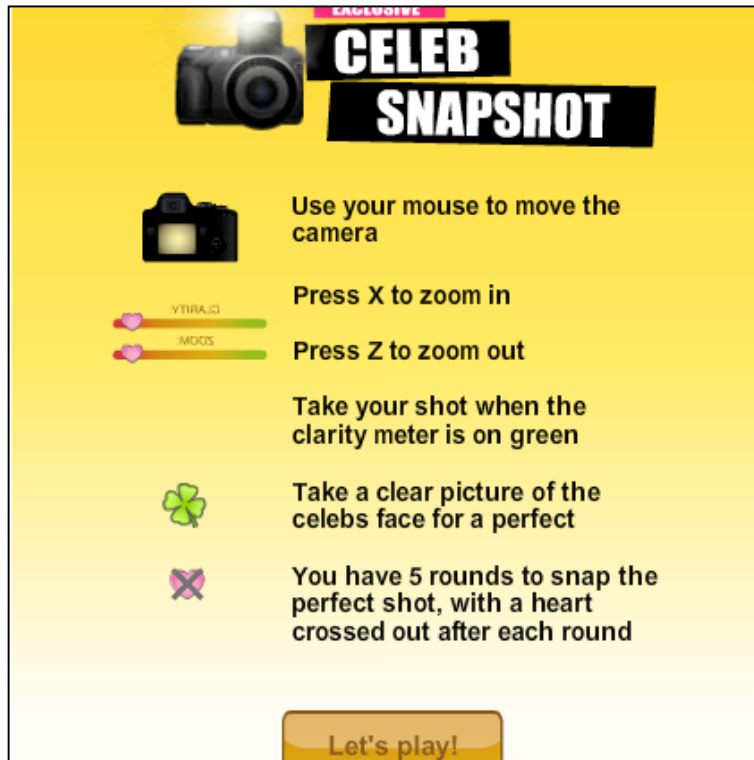


Figure 6-16 Screen shot of the controls for the Celebrity Snapshot mini game on Stardoll



Figure 6-17 Screen shot of the player's view of Celebrity Snapshot mini game on Stardoll

Celebrity themed mini games are an integral aspect to *Stardoll's* celebrity culture. I focus on the game Celebrity Snapshot in this discussion, as it remained a feature of *Stardoll's* selection of mini games throughout the period the website was analysed.

The game positions the player as a member of the paparazzi and the aim is to take photographs of celebrities as they move around the screen. The player's view of the game is through the viewfinder of a camera, as seen in Figure 6-17, which can be moved around the screen to capture images and additional controls allow the player to focus the camera. Points are scored based on the number and clarity of the pictures taken of celebrities' faces – focused images score higher points for the player. A league table of the highest scores is continuously updated on the page.

The game mechanisms of Celebrity Snapshot mirror those of first person shoot – em – style games. In particular the player's view through the camera is reminiscent of the view from a gun as illustrated in Figure 6-17. However, *Stardoll's* gendered conventions mean that celebrity culture is used as a framework so that Celebrity Snapshot can be reworked as a gender (and age) appropriate shooting game for a tween cultural space.

*Stardoll's* mini game Celebrity Snapshot is a typical example of the participatory celebrity culture created on the site where girls' play is framed within discourses of celebrity. In this example the player is positioned within celebrity culture taking on the role of the paparazzi. In comparison to the celebrity gossip spaces the celebrity focused mini games represent a distinctly different framing of celebrity on *Stardoll*.



Starstruck 2013: celebrity opportunity on the site

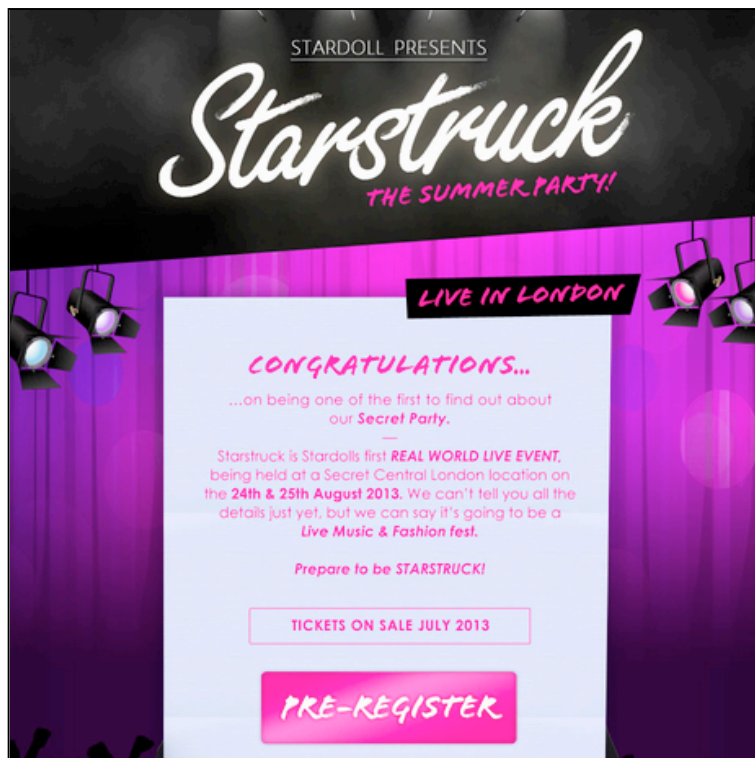


Figure 6-18 Advert for Stardoll's Starstruck party



Figure 6-19 Advert for Stardoll's Starstruck party

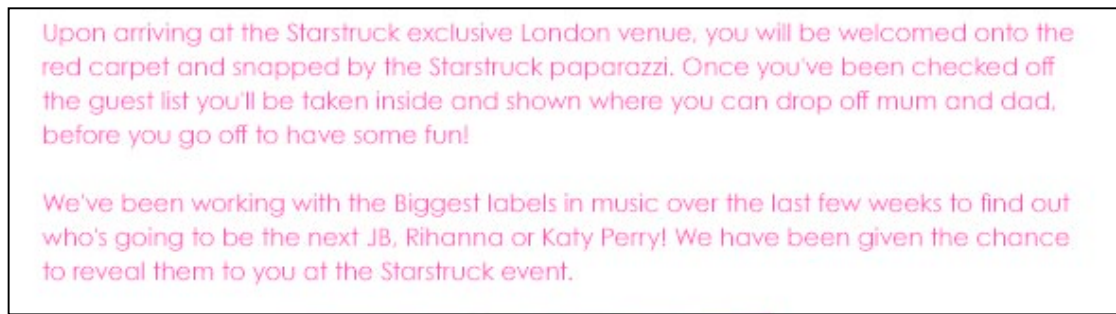


Figure 6-20 Advert for Stardoll's Starstruck party

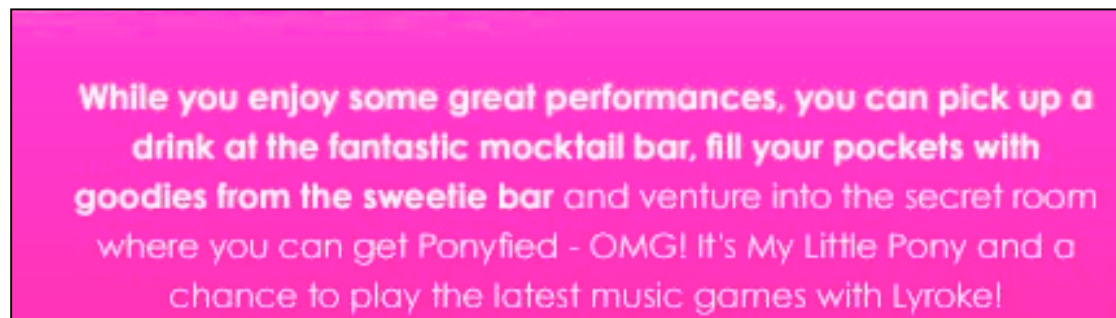


Figure 6-21 Advert for Stardoll's Starstruck party

The *Starstruck* promotion was established in 2013 and culminated in an offline party hosted by *Stardoll* held in London. The promotion featured both online and offline aspects; for example members received a free dress for their *Stardoll* avatar when they registered for the event and could win tickets to attend the *Stardoll* party in London. The event was publicised on *Stardoll* through adverts, free gifts and featured in a number of articles published on the *Starblog*. The images in Figures 6.18, 6.19, 6.20 and 6.21 are from promotional material for *Starstruck* 2013. Through the event *Stardoll* position themselves as having insider celebrity culture knowledge, as they are working with the 'biggest labels in music', offering girls the opportunity for girls who 'like the sound of rubbing shoulders with new celebs' to engage with *Stardoll's* celebrity culture offline. The *Starstruck* promotion

articulates celebrity culture as central to tween girlhood and combines central tween interests on *Stardoll* – fashion and celebrity culture – in an offline event.

The design of the *Starstruck* promotion is explicitly tween, reflecting *Stardoll's* tween cultural positioning. Illustrated in the above figures *Starstruck* offers girls 'mocktails', a 'sweetie table' and the chance to get 'ponified' - that is dressing up as characters from *My Little Pony*. In addition it is assumed girls will attend the event with their parents as the extract in Figure 6.20 above states that there will be somewhere to 'leave mum and dad'. In explicitly positioning the event for tweens the *Starstruck* promotion presents girls with an opportunity to participate in *Stardoll's* (appropriate) celebrity culture within a safe environment.

Furthermore girls are invited to participate in celebrity culture at the event by being treated as celebrities. Figure 6-20 illustrates this, which promises that girls will be 'welcomed by the red carpet and snapped by the *Starstruck* paparazzi'. The photographs taken at the *Starstruck* event were later displayed on the *Starblog*, where these articles on the promotions were alongside regular features and articles discussing celebrity gossip. The *Starstruck* event gives *Stardoll* members the opportunity to experience and participate in celebrity culture. I extend this discussion in the following section where I examine the 'celebritisation' of the tween self on *Stardoll*.

### 6.3.2.3. *Celebritisation of the self on Stardoll*

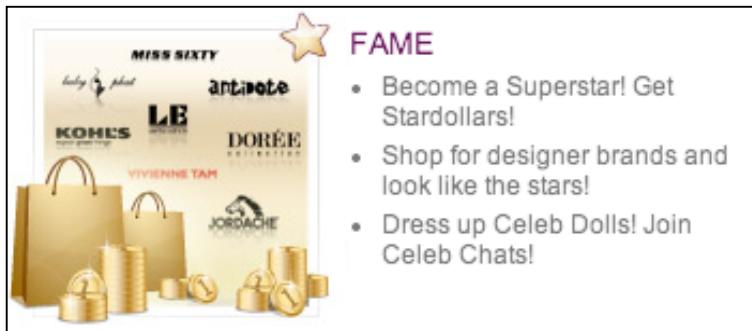


Figure 6-22 Advert for Superstar membership on Stardoll

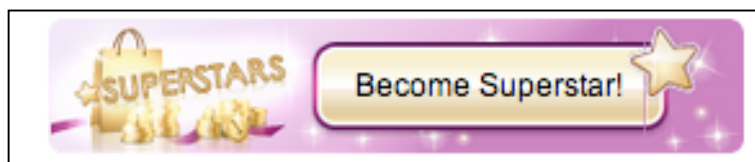


Figure 6-23 Advert to upgrade to Superstar membership on Stardoll

In the previous discussion I examined how girls on the site are given the opportunity to participate in celebrity culture in various ways. In this section I build on this discussion to explore in greater detail the 'celebritisation' of the self as a central theme in *Stardoll's* articulation of tween girlhood.

As I mentioned in Chapter 4 *Stardoll* offers members two types of membership account, Non Superstar (which is free) and Superstar (which requires a monthly subscription), corresponding to different levels of access and functionality on the site. Both of the adverts shown in Figure 6-22 and Figure 6-23 encourage girls to upgrade to a 'Superstar' account. Upgrading to a Superstar account is presented as an opportunity for girls to buy into celebrity culture on the site and gain celebrity

status. *Stardoll* offers girls a celebrity framed, aspirational and commodified girlhood and the formulation of celebrity status on the site articulate that branded consumer products, shopping as a leisure activity and financial capital, which translates to disposable income, signify celebrity. The link between celebrity culture and consumption is evident in the advert in Figure 6-22 where girls are encouraged to upgrade to Superstar membership in order to 'shop for designer brands and look like the stars'. The link is further reinforced by the image accompanying the advert that lists a number of brands accompanied by gold shopping bags and piles of glittering gold Stardollars.

Superstar members' celebrity status is reflected in access and privileges on the site, these imitate activities considered to be part of celebrity culture, for example shopping for designer clothes and hosting parties. Here girls are not only being offered opportunities to participate in celebrity culture through play, discussed in the previous section, but in upgrading to Superstar membership girls can themselves become celebrities on the site. This opportunity is part of the celebritisation of the self on *Stardoll*, I turn to examine two case studies to explore this in greater detail.


Celebritisation of the self – Miss Stardoll World and Stardoll Cover Girl competitions



Figure 6-24 Screen shot of the Miss Stardoll World competition homepage

**MISS STARDOLL WORLD PRIZES**

This year the winner of Miss Stardoll World 2012 will receive some fabulously fashionable prizes. Check them out below.



**MISS STARDOLL WORLD GRAND PRIZE**

The winner will have her doll created for the Stardoll dress up doll game • Two whole years of Superstar membership for FREE • Become a Royalty member • 2000 Stardollars • 2000 Starcoins • Exclusive Miss Stardoll World Crown / Tiara (in game) • Exclusive Miss Stardoll World sash (in game) • One gorgeous wardrobe filled with stylish and luxurious clothes • Winner gets inducted into MSW Wall of Fame (There will be a wall in the Stardoll office reserved for framed pictures of all Miss Stardoll Winners) • A tiara (delivered to winner's home) • Winner of Stardoll Barbie dolls (2) • Big prize – Digital Camera (Capture your inspiration) • Unlocks Achievement for being a finalist • Trading Cards (Virtual / Real).

Figure 6-25 Screen shot of the Miss Stardoll World competition prizes

## Chapter 6 - (De) Constructing Stardolls: Interrogating the Construction of Tween Culture and Discourses of Tween Girlhood on *Stardoll*

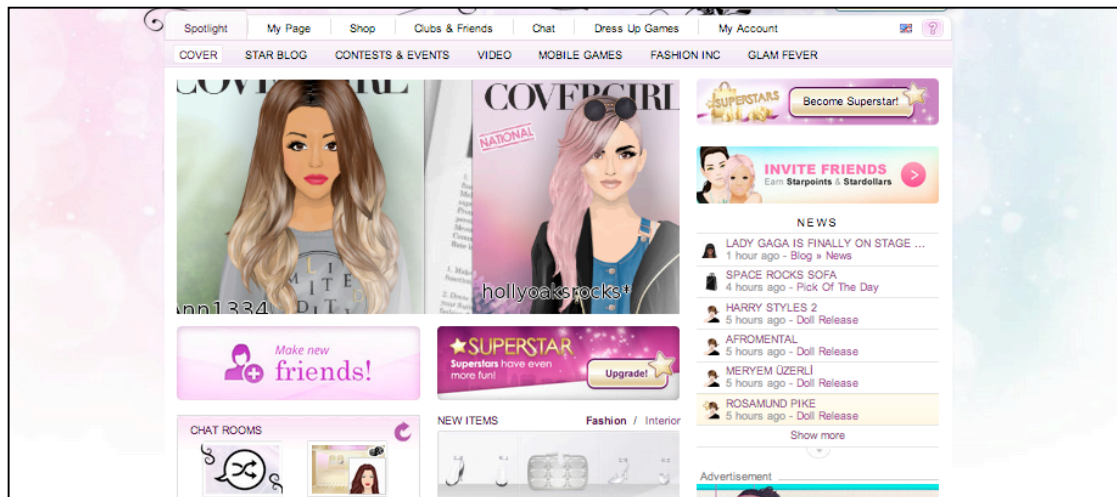


Figure 6-26 Screen shot of Stardoll's homepage

In this section I focus on two competitions that were recurrent features of *Stardoll* throughout my period of study, Covergirl and Miss Stardoll World, to explore how *Stardoll* frame the celebrityisation of the self as an activity and part of discourses of tween girlhood. *Stardoll's* Covergirl and Miss Stardoll World competitions are key features in the site's articulations of celebrity culture and offer girls the opportunity to experience celebrity status on *Stardoll*. They draw on offline aspects of celebrity culture, the front covers of celebrity gossip magazines and the Miss World beauty pageant. These recurring competitions highlight the gendered nature of celebrity culture on *Stardoll* as both contests mirror gendered aspects of offline celebrity culture, beauty pageants and magazines.

Achieving celebrity status on the site is the goal of celebrity play and is reinforced by the chosen prizes for each competition. As stated in Figure 6-25 above one of the prizes for winning the Miss Stardoll World competition is having your avatar used in *Stardoll's* dress up games alongside established celebrities. The prize for the Covergirl competition is for the winner to be featured on *Stardoll's* home page,



see Figure 6-26. Girls' play on *Stardoll* is framed as play within a consumer based celebrity culture through which the online self can gain status by becoming a celebrity.

The site encourages girls to actively engage in the practices of celebrity culture in their aim to become celebrities on *Stardoll*. In order to succeed at the Covergirl and Miss Stardoll World competitions girls must manage their own celebrity careers and undertake promotional work. The competitions require girls to have a 'Do It Yourself' attitude in similar ways to Harris' (2004) 'can do' girlhood, where girls' enthusiasm and hard work aids in their success. In addition *Stardoll's* tween girlhood assumes enterprising girls are equipped with self-management traits, another aspect of neoliberal postfeminism discussed by Gill and Scharff (2011). Both the Covergirl and Miss Stardoll World competitions require girls to embrace self-promotion on the site and in doing so manage themselves. For example *Stardoll* suggest that girls 'create a Miss Stardoll World campaign' to publicise their own talents in order to gain votes. Similarly *Stardoll* advise that girls broadcast<sup>5</sup> messages to attract voters in the daily Cover Girl competition.

Differences between girls' memberships (that are based on monthly payments), which heavily structure their access, and their available financial capital on the site, are not mentioned in the promotional material for the Covergirl and Miss Stardoll World competitions. Instead girls are afforded individual agency to self manage their own success within these competitions. The emphasis on the individual's work, structured around discourses of agency and choice, reflect the postfeminist

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<sup>5</sup> Broadcasts are messages published on *Stardoll's* homepage.



and neoliberal positioning of *Stardoll's* tween girlhood. Furthermore by not articulating differences between girls' memberships, access and financial capital on the site *Stardoll's* assumed meritocratic space is maintained.

Discourses of celebrity are an important part of *Stardoll's* articulation of tween girlhood that assumes an interest in celebrity culture and a desire to participate in celebrity culture. In addition to drawing on established formats of celebrity gossip *Stardoll* creates a participatory celebrity culture where girls can play within and as celebrities through a process of celebritisation. Discourses of celebrity culture on *Stardoll* are commodified in similar ways to articulations of consumerism and formulated as part of girls' identity projects on the site.

### **6.3.3. The Can Do Girls: education and career opportunities on *Stardoll***

In this section I interrogate discourses of education and careers, the third part of *Stardoll's* articulations of tween girlhood that I discuss in this chapter. I draw on the 'can do' discourse of girlhood discussed by Harris (2004) to extend the discussion in this chapter so far exploring how *Stardoll's* idea of tween girlhood is postfeminist and neoliberal in nature. In order to focus the discussion I have chosen two features of *Stardoll* to focus on, first the Stardoll Academy and second the Stylist Studio. I argue that the articulation of careers and education is framed as a productive use of girls' time on the site, in comparison to their play within consumer culture, which I have already discussed, is presented as leisure time.

## Chapter 6 - (De) Constructing Stardolls: Interrogating the Construction of Tween Culture and Discourses of Tween Girlhood on *Stardoll*

### The Stardoll Academy

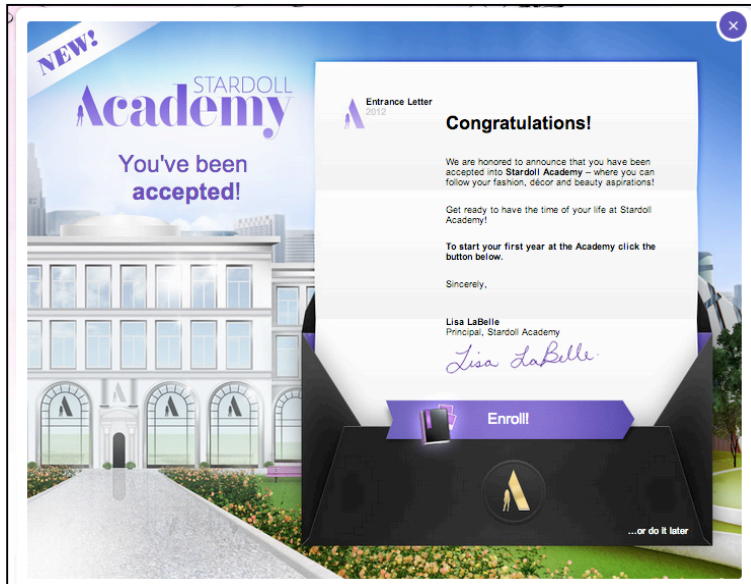


Figure 6-27 Screen shot from the Stardoll Academy acceptance page



Figure 6-28 Screen shot from the Stardoll Academy

The Stardoll Academy is an optional feature on *Stardoll* that members have to sign up for. The premise of the Academy is to teach members how to excel in design and beauty careers on *Stardoll*, this is achieved through a series of tasks where members build up a portfolio of work. *Stardoll* presents the Academy as a learning

experience, which is reflected in their choice to draw on an educational framework to situate these activities. For example, once members have registered with Stardoll Academy they receive an Academy acceptance letter, shown in Figure 6-27 above. The letter mirrors college and university acceptance letters, is signed by the Stardoll Academy principle and informs the reader that members are required to enrol with the Academy. The educational framework is further reinforced during the introduction to the Academy, displayed in Figure 6-28, where members are welcomed to their 'first day of school' and asked to take a picture for the Stardoll Academy yearbook.

Through this framework the Academy is presented as an optional feature for members who want to take advantage of the educational opportunities on the site to improve their design skills. The structure of the Stardoll Academy reflects an emphasis on education in postfeminist contexts discussed by Harris (2004) who argues that girls' success within the discourse of 'can do' girlhood is achieving success within education. Furthermore girls' successes in educational spaces underscore the meritocratic nature of neoliberalism.

*Stardoll's* Stylist Studio

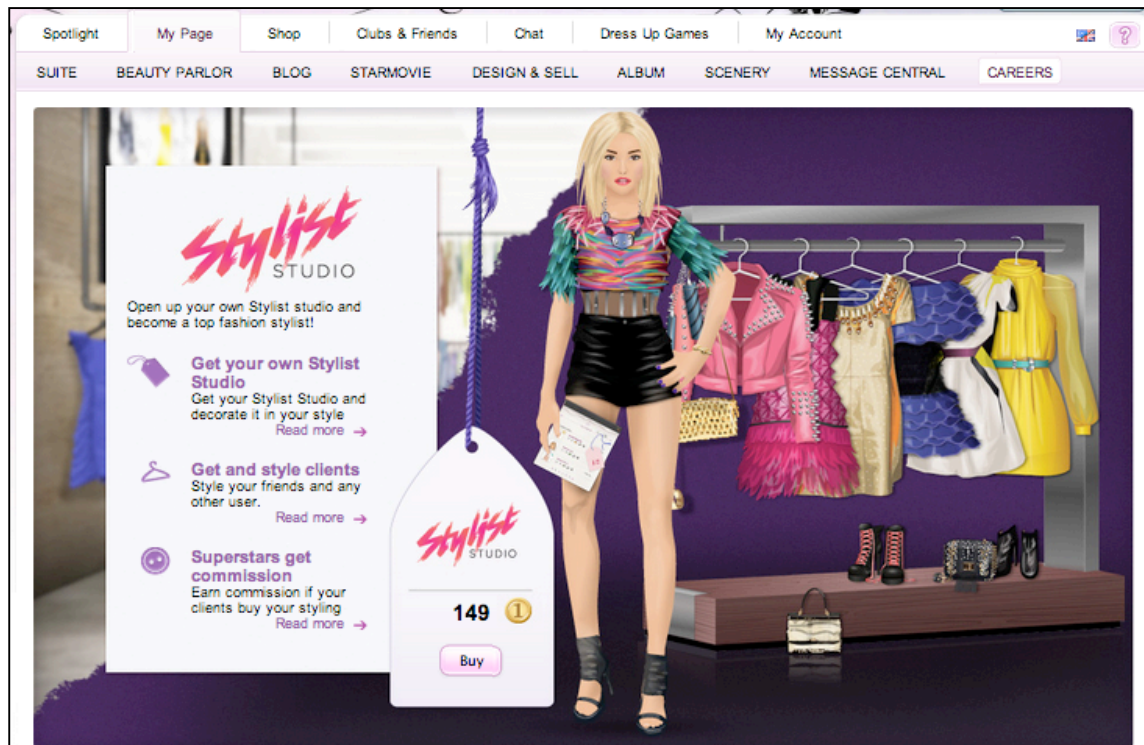


Figure 6-29 Screen shot of the Stylist Studio on Stardoll

The careers centre on *Stardoll* presents girls with an opportunity to pay (using Stardollars) for access to a Stylist Studio, depicted in Figure 6-29. From their Stylist Studio girls can style their friends or other members, 'clients', and if they are Superstar members they can earn commission (in Stardollars) from clients if they choose to purchase their style.

In the Stylist Studio girls dress up *Stardoll* avatars, however this activity is framed as distinct from the dress up games found elsewhere on the site. Within the Stylist Studio members do not dress up dolls, rather they 'style' 'clients'. This is reinforced by the location of the Stylist Studio found under the careers centre tab

rather than alongside other dress up games. The difference in language and location articulates a shift in understanding the purpose of girls' activities in the Stylist Studio, which have shifted from pleasure to production, I examine this change in greater depth below.

The Stylist Studio operates within a neoliberal structure on two levels. First girls are positioned as neoliberal subjects in their stylist careers. The Stylist Studio is an individual project where members are responsible for their own success and in order to be successful girls need to be self managing and enterprising. Girls' positioning through *Stardoll's* Stylist Studio reflects the self-managing and enterprising traits within the neoliberal attributes discussed by Gill and Scharff (2011) in their exploration of neoliberal postfeminist subjectivities.

Girls' successes are rewarded within a neoliberal structure as through commission they can earn Stardollars, which they can spend on the site. The second way the girls participate in neoliberalism is as 'brand ambassadors' for *Stardoll* through their Stylist Studio. In their studios the girls sell *Stardoll* items to other users in a form of peer-to-peer marketing. However this function of the studio is masked by the positioning of girls as neoliberal social actors who are able to take advantage of *Stardoll's* opportunities and earn commission for their work on the site.

Stardoll Academy and the Stylist Studio – creating meritocratic spaces

‘Stardoll Academy is all about building your talent and being yourself!’

‘By styling others, making sales on the items you used in the style, and getting a lot of bookings, you will climb the lists and become a top stylist’

Figure 6-30 Quotations from Stardoll

The Stardoll Academy and *Stardoll's* Stylist Studio are presented as meritocratic opportunities for girls on the site. Both quotations in Figure 6-30 draw on discourses of talent to define these spaces as meritocratic. The first quote in the box above is from the introduction to the Stardoll Academy and states that the feature is ‘all about building your talent’. The second example from the Stylist Studio suggests that girls will be able to ‘climb the lists (stylist rankings) and become a top stylist’. However significant financial barriers to girls’ participation in these spaces are not mentioned. On enrolling with the Stardoll Academy members must have purchased two beauty products on the site to give their avatar a makeover for their yearbook photograph. Thus, even though the Stardoll Academy is promoted as a free feature, girls must have Stardollars to buy the products they need to complete the Academy tasks. Similarly members must purchase access to the Stylist Studio on *Stardoll* and only Superstar members can earn commission from the clients. However for both the Stardoll Academy and the Stylist Studio *Stardoll* construct the space as meritocratic by drawing on notions of talent.

**6.3.3.1. *Can Do Girls: postfeminism, education and careers on Stardoll***

The educational and careers opportunities offered to girls and the structure of these features on *Stardoll* also locate girls within a postfeminist framework. The range of education and career opportunities on *Stardoll* are limited to fashion, interior design, or work in beauty. These career options reflect an emphasis on postfeminist culture through the return and embracement of the feminine with a focus on fashion and beauty (McRobbie, 2009). Locating these opportunities within consumer culture further reinforces the postfeminist positioning of the site.

Both the Stylist Studio and the Stardoll Academy require girls to embody self managing and enterprising attributes, which have been discussed as central to postfeminist subjectivity (Gill and Scharff, 2011 and Koffman and Gill, 2013). For example girls enrolled in the *Stardoll* Academy need to manage their time to complete their portfolio in order to successfully gain a qualification. Within the Stylist Studio girls are required to manage their career through amassing clients. The education and careers opportunities that I have explored in this chapter assume that girls have an entrepreneurial or Do It Yourself approach that is situated within a broader neoliberal framework.

The decision to participate in these opportunities is framed as part of girls' individual responsibility to manage themselves on the site. Within discourses of 'can do' girlhood (Harris, 2004), girls are represented as focused on their futures

and decide to plan for their careers in order to ensure success. *Stardoll's* career and education spaces present girls with opportunities to invest in their future selves on the site to become more successful. As part of this girls' activities at the Stardoll Academy or in their Stylist Studio are presented as a productive use of girls' time on the site because members are working towards their futures and (potentially) earning Stardollars through their work. Therefore girls' leisure time on *Stardoll* is reworked as a productive use of their time on the site, and reflects their 'can do' girl attitude.

The articulation of girls within discourses of 'can do' girlhood on *Stardoll* is heavily classed. As I have mentioned in this chapter there are significant barriers to girls' ability to participate in the education and career opportunities on offer on the site. Framing girls' participation in these activities as part of a choice discourse on the site masks these barriers and reinforces *Stardoll* as a meritocratic space where girls' talent and hard work leads them to success. Tween girlhood on *Stardoll* mirrors Koffman and Gill's argument that middle class girls are positioned as 'hardworking, entrepreneurial authors of their own 'choice biographies' (2013: 87) where constraints on girls' choices are ignored.

#### **6.3.4. *Stardoll's* tween girlhood: discourses of Girl Power and Becoming Stardolls**

I have examined three aspects of *Stardoll's* tween girlhood, (1) consumer culture as a site for girls' tween identity play, (2) a participatory celebrity culture that enables



girls themselves to become celebrities, and (3) the articulation of a 'can do' girlhood evident through education and career opportunities on the site. In this section I draw these aspects of *Stardoll's* tween girlhood together and discuss them in relation to the Girl Power discourse that I outlined in Chapter 2. As explained previously in this thesis there are four aspects to the Girl Power discourse, an anti or non feminist stance, postfeminist, with an emphasis on individual and consumer power (Taft, 2004).

For most of the time I was studying *Stardoll* the website was non-political. However on International Women's Day *Stardoll* ran a competition where girls answered questions about famous women and entrants received a virtual t-shirt for their *Stardoll* avatar and trophy to display in their suite<sup>6</sup>. This was the only example throughout my time on the site where *Stardoll* articulated feminist discourses. Nevertheless the very limited feminist discourse on the site position *Stardoll* as a non-political space for girls, supporting Taft's (2004) argument that Girl Power discourses enabled girls to express gender positivity that was distanced from a political framework.

I have analysed a number of traits identified discussed as integral to postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivities and as part of a 'can do' girlhood; a consumer located identity, empowerment through consumer culture and self management (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Koffman and Gill, 2013 and Harris, 2004) in my analysis of *Stardoll's* notion of tween girlhood. Here I draw my discussions across the three aspects of

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<sup>6</sup> Before the time I studied the website *Stardoll* ran an International Women's Day competition in 2010 where girls dressed up a virtual Mary Wollstonecraft.

*Stardoll's* girlhood together and discuss how these traits are reinforced across the site.

As *Stardoll* is positioned as a site for girls' leisure time the consumer oriented nature of the space locates girls' participation in consumer culture as a fun, leisure activity. Moreover, tween identity is positioned within girls' consumer based play on *Stardoll*, where girls dress up their dolls. In my discussions on *Stardoll's* consumer culture and the celebritisation of the tween self I have discussed how the site locates tween identity play within a commodified space and that within this girls are positioned as savvy, empowered consumers.

The empowerment offered to girls on *Stardoll* is in their ability to participate in the consumer culture on offer. The Superstar membership emphasises this where girls pay to gain access to a commodified celebrity culture. The framework of empowerment on the site is further reinforced by the reward system where girls' receive Stardollars as prizes for winning competitions, promoting the site or commission from their clients, to spend in the virtual shops. Discourses of girls' consumer choice and agency on the site mask the significant barriers some members face to participation in *Stardoll's* consumer culture. As these examples demonstrate, on *Stardoll*, girls are offered the opportunity to access consumer power.

Self management is a central theme to *Stardoll's* notion of tween girlhood. As I have discussed in this chapter the celebritisation of the self and opportunities within the Stardoll Academy and Stylist Studio require girls' ability to self manage. Furthermore the 'can do' girlhood discourse articulated on the site assumes girls

have a sense of the future and want to prepare themselves for future success, this is evidenced in *Stardoll's* education and career features where girls are given the opportunity to invest in their future selves.

#### **6.4.Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored *Stardoll's* construction of the site as a tween space through the design and activities on offer, presenting a cultural analysis of the website drawing on a semiotic and discursive analytic approaches. I have demonstrated how aesthetics and activities offered on the site such as consumer culture, celebrity culture, and education/ career opportunities work to create, denote and identify the space as explicitly tween. I argued that a young, female audience is explicitly evoked through *Stardoll's* design and that this reflects Driscoll's (2005) argument that tween identity can be understood through its participation in a distinctive tween culture.

I went on to interrogate how *Stardoll's* construction of tween femininity is comprised of three aspects; consumer culture, celebrity culture and 'can do' girlhood. I argued that consumer culture is situated as a location for identity play on *Stardoll*. The process of identity formation and work on identity projects on the site is framed as play, which reinforces the tween audience of the site and draws on notions of the tween as becoming. Celebrity culture on *Stardoll* does not only offer girls the opportunity to engage in commentary as part of an online global tween culture but is also participatory allowing girls to actively part in celebrity culture.

*Stardoll's* celebritisation of the self positions girls as neoliberal, postfeminist subjects as they are required to self-manage their celebrity careers and the process of celebritisation is situated in a consumer based identity. The opportunities for education and careers on *Stardoll* assume that girls have a 'can do' girl attitude that is based in postfeminist and neoliberal discourses and requires girls to enact this subjectivity. Examining *Stardoll's* discourses of tween girlhood I have argued that they are articulated and located in a postfeminist, neoliberal context. I have discussed how discourses of girls' individual power, agency and choice structure activities and opportunities on *Stardoll*. As I mentioned throughout this chapter there is no recognition of the barriers to girls' participation in these activities.

This chapter has started to examine a number of key threads that I develop throughout the thesis. I have begun to explore *Stardoll's* construction as an explicitly tween site in this chapter and continue to develop this argument throughout Chapters 7 and 8 where I explore girls' negotiations of the space as tween. In addition I have started to unpack the construction of the tween as a neoliberal, postfeminist subjectivity and discuss the importance of age boundaries to tween identity. These strands will be picked up and further interrogated in subsequent chapters. Girls' experiences and negotiations of tween identity on the site are explored in Chapter 7 through my exploration of celebrity and fandom. In Chapter 8 I go on to examine how *Stardoll* and the girls' themselves govern the site as an explicitly tween space through distinct practices of risk management.

## **Chapter 7. Commanding Representations of Cyrus: Counter Discursive Speech Modes on *Stardoll's Starblog***

### **7.1.Introduction**

In this chapter I examine the interlinking discursive repertoires of tween celebrity and fandom on *Stardoll's Starblog*. In continuing to examine articulations of tween culture on *Stardoll* I further the discussion in Chapter 6, and in this chapter focus on one area of the site in depth to interrogate the governance of 'tween speech'. The data for this chapter was collected from one area of *Stardoll*, the *Starblog* a celebrity gossip blog outlined in Chapter 4 and discussed in Chapter 5. As considered in Chapter 4 I chose Cyrus as the celebrity case study because of her significant position within tween culture, her controversial move away from tween culture and her prominence on *Stardoll*. The *Starblog* articles and attached comment threads about Cyrus form the focused data set used in this chapter.

Analysing on the one hand the *Starblog* articles and, on the other the comment threads for *Stardoll* members, two simultaneous trajectories of utterance, this chapter investigates how tween speech genres operate and how they are governed. This chapter explores the construction and counter construction of Cyrus' celebrity through the *Starblog* articles and in the comment spaces. I argue that 'tween appropriate' values that are constituted through discourses of sexuality provide the framework for both the *Starblog's* and the girls' counter discursive articulations of tween celebrity. While 'tween appropriate' values are common to both the

*Starblog's* and the girls' representations of Cyrus I investigate the different ways that the parallel discourses command Cyrus' celebrity. On the one hand the *Starblog*, though discursive power, moderate representations of Cyrus so that her celebrity can be articulated within a 'tween speech' genre. On the other the girls' counter discursive representations engage in practices of slut shaming and draw on moral codes of sexuality and childhood in their representations of Cyrus. Whilst the command of their representations of Cyrus differ, the values considered 'tween appropriate' in the official and counter discursive spaces coalesce around understandings of tween girlhood as asexual, white and middle class and perceive Cyrus' sexuality as a threat to this girlhood.

In my analysis I draw on Bakhtin's (1970) notion of 'speech genres' and Foucauldian understandings of discursive power to gain purchase on the interactivity of speech on the blog and in the comments. Bakhtin argues that 'each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types (of utterances)... these we may call speech genres' (2004: 60). Both Holquist (2002) and Morris (1996) have discussed the way that genre constrains speech. I bring Bakhtin's concept of 'speech genres' to bear on the data in order to understand the development of speech rules within a 'tween speech' genre. However as argued by Hawes (1999) Bakhtin's linguistic theory does not explore power relations. In this chapter Bakhtin's analysis of the interactivity of linguistics is complemented with Foucauldian notions of discourse and power. For Foucault it is through discourse that knowledge is produced, he argued 'we should admit that power produces knowledge... that power and knowledge directly imply one another' (1980: 27). By

embedding power into understandings of discourse Foucault argues that 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak...discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (1977: 49). Using the concept of discursive power as something productive, I explore the parallel representations of Cyrus on the *Starblog*.

I begin this chapter by exploring three distinct periods in *Stardoll's* representations of Cyrus through the *Starblog* articles. I discuss each phase in turn, first 'Cyrus as Disney tween starlet', second 'the quiet period' and third 'Romance: Cyrus as girlfriend and fiancée'. Having traced her celebrity trajectory I examine the ways that representations of Cyrus are moderated through the articles on the *Starblog* in order to retain her appeal as 'tween appropriate'. I discuss how Cyrus' sexuality transgresses boundaries of tween girlhood and shapes the discursive repertoires in the *Starblog's* representation of Cyrus' celebrity within their 'tween speech' genre.

In the second part of the chapter I discuss the girls' counter – discursive representations of Cyrus through the comment threads attached to *Starblog* articles. Articulations, discussions and negotiations of Cyrus' sexuality are a central feature of these comment spaces. I examine how sexuality functions as a way of constituting Cyrus' celebrity and the girls' fandom trajectories within their counter discourse. I go on to explore the ways that the girls frame Cyrus' sexuality as problematic through her tween celebrity status and her fans' (assumed) tween age. Having set out their discursive representation of Cyrus I investigate their practices of slut shaming as a way of regulating Cyrus' sexuality. I consider attempts, by

some girls, to articulate Cyrus' sexuality as part of a developmental discourse and as an inevitable aspect of contemporary celebrity culture. However I discuss how the girls' discourse of concern commands representations of Cyrus in the comment threads. Finally I return to questions of speech genre and investigate the girls' construction of alternative 'tween speech'.

### **7.2. *Stardoll's* representation of Cyrus through their *Starblog* articles**

In this section I analyse *Stardoll's* representation of Cyrus through their *Starblog* articles from September 2008 to March 2013 arguing that there are three distinctive periods of representation. I explore how significant changes in her presentation are attributed to her gender, age and tween celebrity status as well as the tween cultural space they are produced in. I go on to argue that the way that these aspects of *Stardoll's* representation of Cyrus produce a tween speech genre on the *Starblog* where Cyrus is rendered 'tween appropriate' through the *Starblog's* command of speech. The graph below shows the number of *Starblog* articles reporting on Cyrus published between September 2008 and March 2013. There are 39 news articles that focus on Cyrus during this time period.



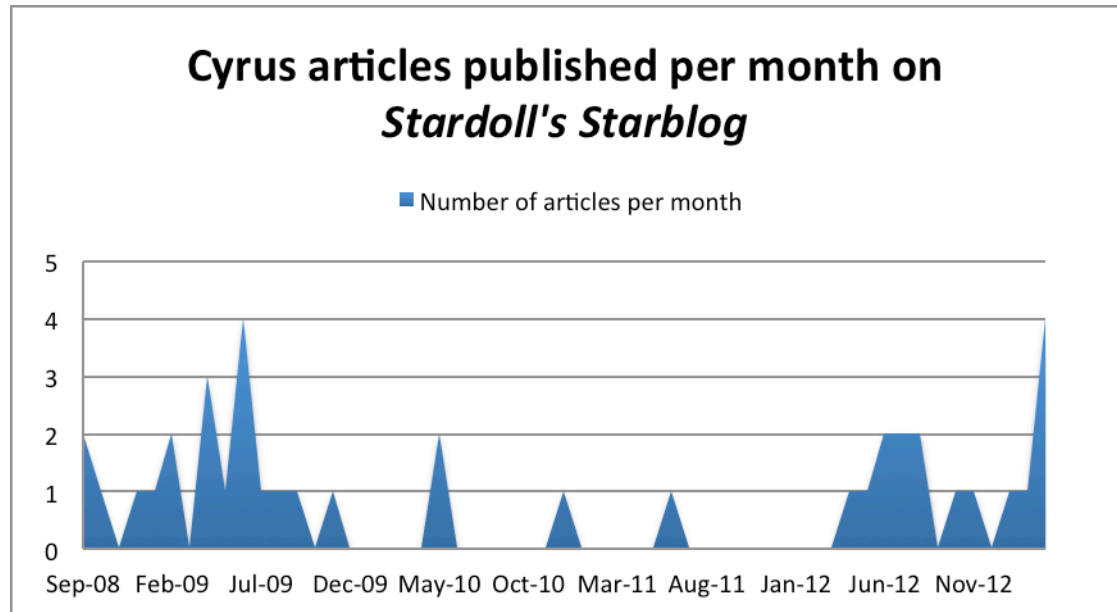


Figure 7-1 Number of Cyrus articles published per month on Stardoll's Starblog

The graph above illustrates the timing and concentration of articles published on Cyrus. Periods of intense reporting on Cyrus are noticeable at the beginning and end of the time span studied. The graph reveals a period of reduced reporting on Cyrus in the middle of the timeline lasting two and a half years. The articles span six years (2008 – 2013) and are divergent in terms of their content, particularly considering that this is a transition period for Cyrus' celebrity persona as I set out in Chapter 4. I have grouped the articles into three periods that are distinctive in their presentation of Cyrus. The first set of articles 'Cyrus as Disney Tween Starlet' are from September 2008 to September 2009. The second period, from October 2009 to March 2012, is termed the 'Quiet Period' as the *Starblog* stops regular reporting on Cyrus. The third collection of articles, 'Romance: Cyrus as girlfriend and fiancée' are from May 2010 to March 2013, overlapping with the second period. I now turn to each set of articles and discuss their representation (or lack of representation) of Cyrus.

### **7.2.1. Cyrus as Disney Tween Starlet: September 2008 – September 2009**

I begin this section by presenting an overview of the articles in this period. In these articles Cyrus is generally referred to as her Hannah Montana persona and the content of the articles is focused on this franchise, from announcing a new television series, to reports on the Hannah Montana feature film premiere. Cyrus' performance as Montana is often the focus on these articles, as is her leisure time and fashion choices. Cyrus is often mentioned alongside other tween celebrities such as the Jonas Brothers and Demi Lovato. Figure 7-2 indicates a number of headlines indicative of the content of the articles in this period.

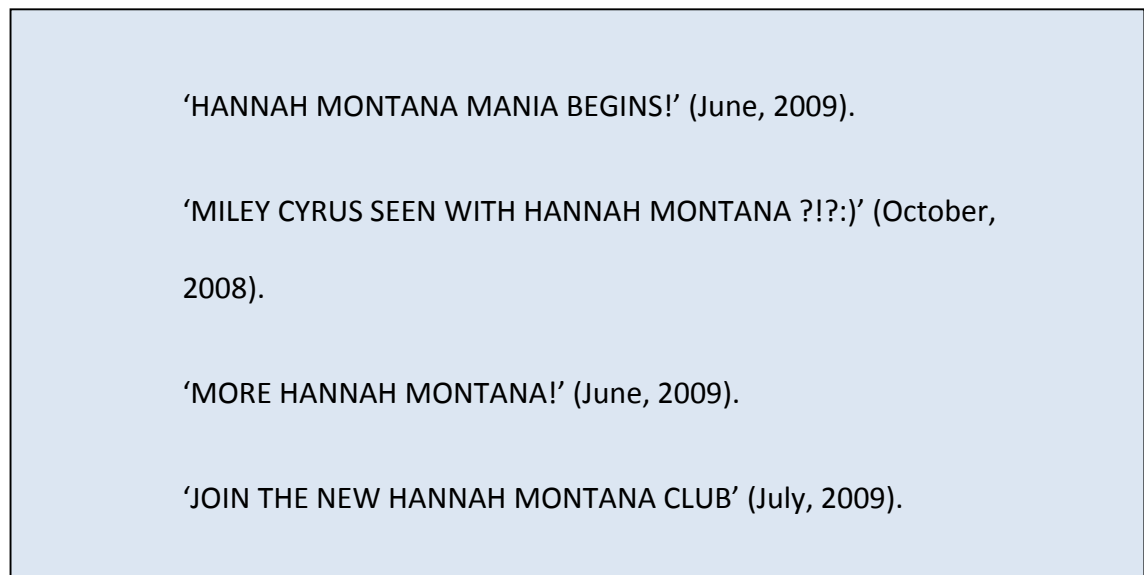


Figure 7-2 Headlines from Starblog articles

Within these articles four discursive themes frame Cyrus as an 'appropriate' tween celebrity. First her age is explicitly and implicitly evoked, second her specific

position as a Disney tween celebrity, third her celebrity is legitimised through hard work and subsequent success and finally the prominence of discussions around her family. In the following sections I explore the discursive themes and argue that these elements work together to create a 'wholesome tween' image for Cyrus' celebrity on the *Starblog*.

#### **7.2.1.1. *Evoking Cyrus' age***

*Stardoll* constructs and emphasises Cyrus' age as 'tween' explicitly and implicitly through cultural signifiers of age. In these articles Cyrus is referred to as a 'tween queen' and 'tween idol', explicitly labelling her as part of tween culture, and of tween age. At other times Cyrus' age is implied, for example in 'Miley Cyrus goes from Hannah Montana 2 Rockstar (February, 2009) which discusses Cyrus' fashion choices. The article mentions her clothes, 'shredded stockings, vintage t-shirt and fringed purple suede boots' and describes Cyrus as looking like a 'little rockstar'. The use of the word 'little' positions Cyrus within tween culture and implies she is playing at dressing up as a rockstar, rather than expressing her identity through her fashion choices, an activity associated with adolescence and teenage culture. Furthermore indicators of Cyrus' tween position are used throughout the articles, for example 'Julian's music moment with Miley Fly-ly on the wall' (January, 2009), discusses Cyrus' single 'Fly on the wall' and refers to her as 'smiley Miley' a well known nickname given to Cyrus by her parents.

#### **7.2.1.2. *Disney childhood***

Throughout the articles the Disney Corporation is cited by mentioning Disney Studios, Disney World and *Hannah Montana* as a Disney production, which works to invoke Cyrus' status as a *Disney* tween star. Positioning Cyrus as a Disney celebrity evokes the corporation's significance in cultural articulations of childhood (Sammond, 2005 and Coulter, 2012). As Coulter argues 'children's media marketplace has become one of the key institutions to frame categories of young people discursively' (2012: 148). Disney's construction of childhood as a series of gendered and aged divisions locates Cyrus as specifically tween. Furthermore particular values of childhood are evoked through Disney's construction and this discourse of childhood is articulated in contrast to what Sammond terms 'unsavoury popular media' (2005: 2). The use of Disney's cultural positioning in these articles locates Cyrus within tweendom and as part of a 'Disney childhood'. The fracturing of childhood into specific age and gendered categories for increased marketing opportunities (Buckingham, 2011 and Coulter, 2012) reinforces the location of cultural spaces. In evoking Disney the articles emphasises Cyrus' tween age and gender position within cultural discourses of childhood.

#### **7.2.1.3. *Cyrus as a tween celebrity***

Throughout this set of articles Cyrus' role as Hannah Montana/ Miley Stewart in Disney's tween television series *Hannah Montana* is a prominent focus of the posts,

and is reflected in the headlines in Figure 7-2. In these articles there is an emphasis on her work as an actress and singer in this television programme, which reinforces her celebrity status as part of the production and representation of tween culture. The *Starblog* positions Cyrus' celebrity status as a result of these cultural products and her significance in tween culture. The majority of the articles in this period discuss the *Hannah Montana* franchise or report on her career successes, such as winning the Kids Choice Awards Favourite Singer award (April, 2009). Within these articles Cyrus' celebrity is framed as labour, for example the article 'Miley Cyrus will do anything for her fans!' (February, 2009), reports on Cyrus' live performance from the Disney studio. The article introduces her performance by stating, 'the weekend usually means that you're free to do whatever you want but Miley spent her Friday performing!' (February, 2009). In positioning Cyrus' celebrity as work her fame can be framed as earned. Moreover the justification for her celebrity is positioned within a hierarchy of 'types' of celebrities (Turner, 2004) and in legitimising her celebrity status through discourses of labour Cyrus is positioned as a worthwhile celebrity deserving of attention and her tween celebrity status.

#### **7.2.1.4. *Cyrus' family***

The final thematic discourse in these articles is Cyrus' family. Throughout these articles Cyrus' family are presented as involved in her celebrity trajectory and are often positioned in supportive or protective roles. Cyrus' family form part of celebrity gossip, for example in 'Miley Cyrus: You've got mail' (September, 2008)

Cyrus' mother and sister are reported taking her out for lunch. Another example is the article 'Miley, peace, love and cycling' (September, 2008), which reports on a family bicycle ride that describes Cyrus as 'enjoying family time' (September, 2008). Another example of how Cyrus' family is depicted is in 'Hannah Montana mania begins!' (June, 2009), reporting on the premiere of Hannah Montana The Movie, which states that 'Miley's friends and family were there to show support' (June, 2009). The inclusion and focus on Cyrus' family in this manner presents her as a child, participating in childhood activities, such as a family bicycle ride or going for ice cream, and not part of a removed adult celebrity culture. The emphasis on family becomes an important part of her wholesome tween image. Taken together the representation of Cyrus as part of the Disney franchise, and in a number of instances referring to her as a tween or teen, combined with discourses of family results in her age and status as a tween star constantly being (re) invoked.

### **7.2.2. Quiet period December 2009 to March 2012**

For a period of two and a half years the frequency of articles about Cyrus on the *Starblog* radically diminishes. This 'quiet period' raises a number of interesting questions about the discursive construction of Cyrus' celebrity on the site. To contextualise the following discussion a brief overview of Cyrus' celebrity trajectory during this period is essential. *Hannah Montana* ended in 2010 without mention on the *Starblog*, despite the focus on promoting the show on *Stardoll* through articles, games, competitions and product placement. Moreover during this period Cyrus

released a number of singles, had two international tours and began filming for a feature length film.

In comparing the representation of Cyrus on the *Starblog* with a more complete understanding of her celebrity trajectory the moderation of reporting on the site is contextualised and can be analysed. In the analysis of these celebrity trajectories I argue that the pattern of articles on the *Starblog* results from *Stardoll's* positioning as a tween site and their creation of a 'tween speech' genre that results in their management of Cyrus as she moves to a public persona that is increasingly sexualised. I argue that there are two key moments in Cyrus' celebrity trajectory, the photoshoot for *Vanity Fair* (April, 2008) and her performance at the Nickelodeon Teen Choice Awards (August, 2009), which occur before *Stardoll* stops reporting on Cyrus in December, 2009. I now turn to discuss how these moments are key transgressions of her 'wholesome' Disney tween persona.

#### ***7.2.2.1. Maintaining Cyrus' tween status: Vanity Fair photoshoot***

In June 2008 *Vanity Fair* published an interview with a then 15-year-old Cyrus titled 'Miley Knows Best' (Handy, 2008) accompanied by photographs taken by Annie Leibovitz. Leibovitz's portrait of Cyrus, shown below, became the focus of media and public discussion and concern.



**Figure 7-3 Photograph by Annie Leibovitz; styled by Michael Roberts.**  
<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/06/miley200806>

The photograph caused considerable public backlash with headlines such as 'Revealing photo threatens a major Disney franchise' (Barnes, 2008), 'Miley Cyrus pulls out of Disney red carpet event after photo scandal' (2008), 'Miley Cyrus bare in Vanity Fair: tells fans she's 'embarrassed'' (Post, 2008) and 'How Vanity Fair "groomed" Miley Cyrus' (Nolan, 2008). In response to this commentary Cyrus and Disney released statements. Disney's reaction to the photograph and backlash placed the blame on Vanity Fair, spokeswoman for Disney McTeague commented, 'unfortunately, as the article suggests a situation was created to deliberately manipulate a 15-year-old in order to sell magazines' (Silverman, 2008). In Cyrus' statement she said, 'I took part in a photo shoot that was supposed to be 'artistic' and now, seeing the photographs and reading the story, I feel so embarrassed' (statement to People, Silverman, 2008).<sup>7</sup> Disney and Cyrus managed the criticisms from the photo shoot by framing Cyrus as a minor who was taken advantage of by

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<sup>7</sup> Both Leibovitz and Vanity Fair issued statements defending the photo shoot (Barnes, 2008).



an exploitative fashion industry - this meant that Cyrus' legitimacy as a tween celebrity was not damaged by the incident.

#### **7.2.2.2. *Breaking boundaries of tweendom: Nickelodeon Teen Awards***

The second significant moment in Cyrus' celebrity trajectory occurs at the Nickelodeon Teen Awards in August 2009. Cyrus was reported as 'pole dancing' during her performance of her single 'Party in the U.S.A.' (2009). Again the incident received significant media attention with headlines such as, 'Miley Cyrus, 16, shows off her pole dancing skills at the Teen Choice Awards' (Smith, 2009) and 'Miley Cyrus performs pole dance at Teen Choice Awards' (Howland-Jackson, 2009). Disney's response to this performance was to distance themselves, 'Disney Channel won't be commenting on that performance although parents can rest assured that all content presented on the Disney Channel is age-appropriate for our audience – kids 6 – 14 and consistent with what our brand values are' (Herrera, 2009). The difference in Disney's response to her performance, as opposed to the statement realised in relation to the Vanity Fair photo shoot, marks this a watershed moment in the constitution of Cyrus' celebrity. It seemingly becomes increasingly difficult for the Disney Corporation to reconcile her sexual public persona with her Disney tween persona (continued through the production of the *Hannah Montana* franchise). The constitution of her celebrity as articulating 'growing up' through demonstrating her sexuality can be seen in her official cultural products, such as the

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Modes on *Stardoll's Starblog*

music video for *Can't be tamed* (2010) and official appearances such as her *Gypsy Heart Tour* (2011)(images below).



Figure 7-4 Screenshot from 'Can't be tamed' music video (2010)

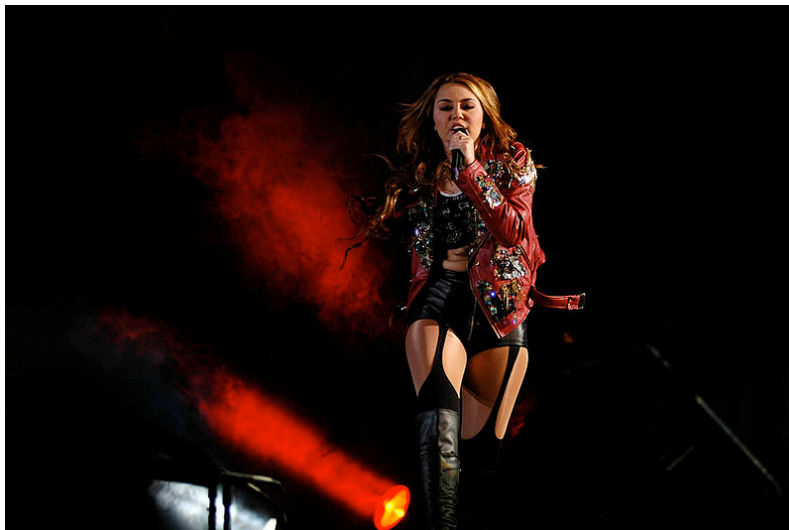


Figure 7-5 Photography by Rodrigo Ballaares Munoz - Gypsy Heart Tour (2011)

Cyrus' celebrity persona is also constructed through moments outside of formal cultural production, for example the leaked release of an amateur video of her performing a lap dance on a producer (Celebuzz, 2010). In general terms during this period Cyrus' behaviour could be read as becoming increasingly adult, (or at

least adolescent) in contrast to tween age appropriate, with images of her smoking, taking drugs surfacing and rumours floating around that she has had cosmetic surgery.

During this period of Cyrus' celebrity trajectory the *Starblog* stops reporting on her. The lack of articles published in this period is why it is termed the 'quiet period'. As I outlined Cyrus' celebrity trajectory shifts in the time before the *Starblog* stops reporting, from the Vanity Fair photo shoot, to the beginning of the 'quiet period', which coincides with Cyrus' performance at the Nickelodeon Teen Choice Awards. Cyrus' increasingly sexualised public persona makes her celebrity more difficult to report on from a tween website as, because of her displays of sexuality she can no longer be considered appropriate for an asexual tween culture. I go on to discuss how the absence of reporting during this period constitutes a 'tween speech' genre later in this chapter. However in the third period of representation the *Starblog* resumes reporting on Cyrus in a way that retains her 'tween appropriate' nature. I now turn to explore the third period of Cyrus' representation.

### **7.2.3. Romance: Cyrus as girlfriend and fiancée: November 2009 – March 2013**

The third period in the *Starblog's* representation of Cyrus illustrates a shift in both the content and style of the news items from first period I discussed, this change occurs as Cyrus moves out of her child/ tween positioning into one of a (semi) adult. The articles I discuss in this section are grouped as 'Romance: Cyrus as

girlfriend and fiancée' and report on a number of adult milestones, such as buying a house, getting engaged, preparing to get married and starting a family. I have identified three significant changes between the first and third period of representation; first, Cyrus' family fade from prominence, second, her career is no longer the focus of the articles and third, in its place Cyrus' relationship with actor Liam Hemsworth takes precedence.

Whilst family members are a prominent aspect of the news articles in the first data set they make a very limited appearance in the third period. The only article mentioning Cyrus' family in the set of articles is 'Miley Cyrus' first home!' (May, 2010). However, the article positions Cyrus as growing up and gaining her independence by living alone. The exclusion of her family in this more recent set of articles demonstrates a shift between the three periods of representation, reflecting Cyrus moving from childhood to adulthood through this period. Again in contrast to the early articles just two of the later group of articles mention Cyrus' career. These are her cameo appearance in *Sex and the City 2* and launching her own clothing line. Furthermore these articles are from November 2009 and December 2010 respectively and therefore occur near the beginning of this period.

**7.2.3.1. Romance takes precedence**

'MILEY & LIAM ARE TOO CUTE!' (May, 2010).

'MILEY CYRUS CONFIRMS ENGAGEMENT TO LIAM HEMSOWRTH!' (June, 2012).

'WE'VE GOT THE DEETS! MILEY CYRUS' ENGAGEMENT RING!' (June, 2012).

'ARE MILEY AND LIAM PLANNING ON A BABY?!' (July, 2012).

'MILEY CYRUS AND LIAM HEMSOWRTH'S WEDDING PLANS REVEALED!' (November, 2012).

Figure 7-6 Headlines from Starblog articles

Cyrus' relationship with Hemsworth takes an increasingly centralised position in the second period of *Starblog* articles. Out of the 21 articles published in this period, 15 focus on Cyrus and Hemsworth's relationship with some examples of typical headlines are illustrated in the Figure 7.6 above. This group of *Starblog* articles report on relationship milestones such as their engagement and wedding plans as well as discussing rumours regarding their relationship, for example in 'Are Miley and Liam planning on a baby?!'.

Cyrus and Hemsworth's relationship is first mentioned in 'Miley and Liam are too cute!' (May, 2010) an article reporting on their date. In this article the *Starblog*

reports that 'Miley Cyrus and her latest hot boyfriend Liam Hemsworth were out on a play date' (May, 2010). The use of the term 'play date' and the repetition of 'cute' in the title and article presents their relationship within a childhood framework. Cyrus and Hemsworth's relationship becomes the focus of the *Starblog* articles on Cyrus from this period onwards. The *Starblog's* commentary on their relationship intensifies as the couple announce their engagement, publishing four articles in two months discussing their engagement and speculating on wedding plans.

#### **7.2.3.2. *From Princess to Bride: discourses of femininity***

'Word! Miley Cyrus' most inspirational quotes ever!' (March, 2013) was published after the announcement of Cyrus and Hemsworth's engagement and a number of articles on the *Starblog* discussing their wedding plans. Reflecting the focus on Cyrus and Hemsworth's relationship the article comments that 'Princess Miles is living the dream and therefore we have collected some of her most inspirational quotes this week!' (March, 2013). This article provides an interesting focus for the discussion examining how Cyrus is represented in the third period of articles because it articulates a thematic shift in the *Starblog's* representations of Cyrus drawing on discourses of 'princess' girlhood and bridal femininity.

The article begins with a reflection on Cyrus' career, 'we have watched her (go) from a Disney princess to a Hollywood babe in an eye blink' (March, 2013). Referring to Cyrus as a princess in this article reinforces her position as a part of a

postfeminist tween culture. The rise in 'princess girlhood' or the 'princessification' of girlhood epitomises many aspects of postfeminist tween culture; consumerism, beauty culture and importantly a return to notions of gendered essentialism. The cultural significance of the princess as a figure in tween culture is iconic as part of these broader cultural changes. In the creation of a princess discourse Pollen (2011) discusses Disney's control of dominant images of princesses such as Cinderella and Snow White, which are drawn together and branded as 'Disney Princesses'. In referring to Cyrus as a princess the *Starblog* draws on Disney's commodification of the princess genre and this is further amplified through Cyrus' central role in Disney's tween culture. As noted by Sweeny (2011) Disney's princess discourse reinforces an essentialist framework where girls' desires to be part of princess culture are portrayed as a natural gendered instinct. The princessification discourse effectively places girls as able to return to the 'feminine' after feminism (see for example Kehily, 2008 and McRobbie, 2009). In labelling Cyrus as a princess, she can be seen as returning to the romantically feminine in comparison to her sexualised persona omitted from the *Starblog's* representations in the 'quiet period'.

The narratives of 'Disney Princesses' revolve around romance, the climax of which is the wedding (see for example Disney films such as Snow White, 1937, Cinderella, 1950 or the Little Mermaid, 1989). In the articulation of Cyrus' celebrity in the *Starblog* articles a similar princess discourse is expressed for real life 'Disney Princess' Cyrus. The romantic discourse is reinforced by the emphasis the *Starblog*

places on their relationship, and in particular key milestones such as their engagement and wedding.

The article clearly places Cyrus' forthcoming wedding as the highlight of her career, 'Miley Cyrus is now standing right in front of the biggest happening in her life so far – she's going to get married! Yes, Princess Miles is living the dream' (March, 2013). Despite mentioning her career achievements the article firmly places getting married as the 'biggest happening in her life'. Driscoll discusses how 'feminine adolescence is a crescendo of value climaxing at the bridal moment' (2002: 179), and this moment is the desirable end of adolescent girlhood. This trajectory of girlhood can be viewed in the *Starblog's* presentation of Cyrus, as despite her career accomplishments it is her engagement and subsequent wedding that are positioned as the most significant moments. The trajectory of articles in the third period builds up to Cyrus' wedding day. The presentation of Cyrus through the representations on the *Starblog* follows Driscoll's argument that 'bridal moments' such as the first date, kiss, engagement and ultimately the wedding structure the landscape and lifecycle of girlhood. Cyrus' representation in this period as the girlfriend and then fiancée of Hemsworth romanticises Cyrus. The focus on their engagement and wedding plans on the blog brings Cyrus' sexuality under control and reframes her as romantic and therefore 'tween appropriate'. 'Word! Miley Cyrus' most inspirational quotes ever!' (March, 2013) captures the move in the *Starblog's* focus from Cyrus' career milestones to the importance of relationship milestones, which become the only way she is represented on the site. While her



life might be an 'unwritten success story' it is clear that her marriage, and wedding, takes precedence.

I have explored how Cyrus' representation on the *Starblog* changes from her persona as Hannah Montana to depictions of her as a girlfriend and fiancée, seamlessly bypassing her increasingly sexualised public persona. The distinctive pattern of Cyrus' celebrity on the *Starblog* uncovers a moderation process in the construction of tween appropriate culture. The transition of Cyrus' tween celebrity within a tween cultural space opens up questions over appropriate speech and discursive power, I now turn to these issues.

#### **7.2.4. The governance of 'tween speech' through the *Starblog* articles on Cyrus**

Having set out the trajectory of Cyrus' representation on the *Starblog* I examine the construction of a 'tween speech' genre on the site drawing on Bhaktin's concept of 'speech genre' and Foucauldian understandings of discursive power. I argue that the moderation of Cyrus' celebrity persona on the *Starblog* constitutes a 'tween speech genre' that operates as a framework structuring the articulation of Cyrus' celebrity.

The *Starblog's* discursive representations of Cyrus are framed around notions of 'appropriate' sexuality considering Cyrus' position as a tween celebrity and her tween audience on the site. As outlined in Chapter 2 the distinction of childhood as a separate state is articulated through a discourse of innocence that renders sexual

knowledge a significant, highly regulated boundary of childhood (Meyer, 2008 and Robinson, 2012). Within articulations on the *Starblog* Cyrus' sexuality needs to be managed because it threatens understandings of tween girlhood and disrupts the tween speech genre of the site.

As set out at the beginning of this chapter the first period of articles 'Cyrus as Disney tween starlet' constructs Cyrus as a tween actress through referencing her age, her family and her Disney tween status. The moderation of Cyrus' sexuality during the first set of articles is undertaken subtly and through the language used and the framing of Cyrus, produces representations of Cyrus as a tween celebrity. The *Starblog* highlights her age and tween status in explicit and implicit ways, rendering her asexual. When Cyrus' celebrity persona becomes increasingly sexualised the *Starblog* stops reporting on her as her sexualised persona during this period disturbs the notion of contemporary girlhood as an asexual state, of which the site is part of. In the second period Cyrus no longer fits within accepted speech utterances of a tween speech genre because her overt sexuality is 'inappropriate'. Within the second period the *Starblog* undertakes an explicit moderation of Cyrus as the blog stops reporting on her during this time of controversy.

However, the *Starblog* resumes reporting on Cyrus once she is in a relationship with Hemsworth and frames her within a romantic discourse. Their engagement and wedding plans are the focus of the articles in the third period where Cyrus is referred to as Hemsworth's 'girlfriend' or 'fiancée'. Within a romantic discourse Cyrus' sexuality is positioned as under control as she prepares for her fairy tale wedding. In articulating Cyrus within a romantic discourse the *Starblog* frames

Cyrus as 'tween appropriate' again. Throughout their discursive representations of Cyrus the *Starblog* subtly manages her sexuality by desexualising her in the first period and romanticising her sexuality in the third to fit in with established values of girlhood and notions of 'tween appropriate sexuality'.

Cyrus' tween celebrity status, and the *Starblog's* tween cultural positioning, frames her sexuality as 'inappropriate' within a tween speech genre. Fischer (2011) argues that in contemporary society it is *who* engages in sexual behaviour rather than the behaviour itself that is focussed on. Cyrus' behaviour is articulated as inappropriate because of her tween celebrity status that positions her as a role model for tween girls. Furthermore, Cyrus' tween persona *Hannah Montana* continues to exist alongside her emerging sexualised celebrity and her tween fans continue to consume her as part of tween culture.

The representations of Cyrus on the *Starblog* are contextualised within recurrent moral anxieties over contemporary girlhood. Prominent discourses lamenting the death of childhood and anxieties over the sexualisation of girls articulate girlhood as fragile and at risk from contemporary society (see for example Postman, 1983, Elkind, 2001 and Palmer, 2006). Cyrus' emerging sexualised persona locates her within a 'toxic' sexualised culture and contributes to concerns over the precocious sexualisation of girls. Moreover, Cyrus' changing celebrity persona invokes anxieties because her tween fans, young girls, are seen as a passive and uncritical audience (Egan and Hawkes, 2008). As such tween girls are positioned as innately vulnerable and at risk from negative cultural influences (see for example Papadopoulos, 2010). The moderation of appropriate knowledge by adults on

*Stardoll* is understood through cultural positions and values and there are two ways these are challenged by Cyrus' changing persona. First her celebrity persona's increasing sexuality disrupts the notion of childhood as asexual, and second Cyrus' power over her tween audience threatens her fans' childhoods. Values of tween girlhood and (appropriate) sexuality shape the boundaries of the *Starblog's* tween speech genre.

#### **7.2.4.1. Conclusion**

The *Starblog's* representations of Cyrus' celebrity as 'tween appropriate' demonstrate the discursive power the blog has over cultural content. As Trawler notes 'the socially constitutive power of discourse is strong largely because of its 'invisible' taken for granted nature' (2001:197). Exploring the *Starblog's* representations over time I have revealed the invisibility of its moderation of Cyrus' celebrity. In doing so I have discussed the boundaries of a specific 'tween speech' genre articulated through notions of 'appropriate sexuality' on the *Starblog*. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of discourse, McHoul and Grace argue, 'discourses always function in relation to *power relations*' (1993: 39, original emphasis). In maintaining the tween speech genre the *Starblog* commands discursive power over Cyrus' representations. However as noted by Trawler (2001) there are opportunities for alternative repertoires to emerge and counter dominant discourses. I now turn to the analysis of the counter discourse of Cyrus' celebrity created by the girls who comment on *Starblog* articles.

### **7.3. Counter discourses of Cyrus: Unpacking representations of Cyrus in the girls' comment threads**

In this chapter so far I have outlined and analysed the tween speech genre on the *Starblog* through exploring their shifting representations of Cyrus over three time periods. I now turn to the girls' parallel commentary on the comment threads on the *Starblog*. Within the comment threads the girls negotiate their own representations of Cyrus and in this process they create a counter discourse of her celebrity that is articulated in contrast to the official trajectory on the *Starblog*.

The *Starblog* provides a comment space with each news article, allowing girls to comment in a linear fashion. The design of the comment pages restricts reading the comment thread as a whole piece as only the last 10 – 12 comments can be viewed on one page and there is no search or tagging function to refer to topics or themes. The comment spaces remain active in the archives so comments can be added at a later date, however this was rare in the Cyrus articles.

My discussion analysing the girls' comments explores two aspects; investigating the articulation, functions and regulation of Cyrus' sexuality within the girls' counter discourse and how their speech constitutes a distinctive speech genre governed by speech rules. I begin by examining four aspects of the girls' discursive construction of Cyrus' sexuality.

First I explore the girls' use of sexuality as a framework. On the one hand Cyrus' sexuality provides a structure for their alternative discourse of her celebrity through

the use of referenced events in her celebrity trajectory and their division of her Monatana/ Cyrus personas. On the other, framing Cyrus' celebrity through her sexuality enables the girls to articulate their fandom trajectories. The girls' continued use of the distinction between Cyrus' personas means they can remain fans of Hannah Montana without legitimising Cyrus' 'inappropriate' behaviour.

Second, I discuss how Cyrus' sexuality is articulated as 'inappropriate' because of her specific position as a tween celebrity, her role model status and her tween aged fan base. I explore how the girls produce 'tween appropriate' values in their explicit regulation of Cyrus' celebrity.

Third, I explore how the girls police and regulate Cyrus' sexuality through practices of slut shaming. I identify three prevalent sites for slut shaming, events in Cyrus' celebrity trajectory, performances and clothing. I argue that the girls' practices of slut shaming regulate tween (middle class and white) girlhood from the threat of Cyrus' sexuality.

Finally, in response to this I consider the attempts by some girls to articulate a different discourse of Cyrus' sexuality suggesting that she is part of a celebrity culture that demands a sexualised image. I conclude that the command of Cyrus' celebrity in this counter discourse is achieved through moralising discourses of concern.

Having analysed the girls' counter discursive representations of Cyrus I return to questions of speech genre, and I discuss how the girls develop alternative modes of utterance in the comment spaces. In examining the rules of their speech genre I

analyse three features. First I argue that the rule bound, moderated tween speech genre set up by *Stardoll* becomes porous in terms of the content that is available to be discussed as the girls who use the space bring with them their own knowledge presenting a very different discourse of Cyrus. Second I argue that the tone is significantly different between the girls' animated discussion and the *Starblog's* neutral representations of Cyrus. Third I discuss how the speech rules of the comment spaces rely on shared cultural knowledge of tween culture.

### 7.3.1. The articulation and use of Cyrus' sexuality in the girls' comments

'she's such a slut she deserves to be treated like one' (November, 2009).

'she look like a hocker on the first pic but the pic with that long orange dress is gorgeous 😊' (August, 2012).

'its about time. shes a whore and needs life' (June, 2009).

'what a slut' (August, 2012).

Figure 7-7 Comments from the Starblog's comment threads

'Slut', 'whore', 'ho', 'slag', 'tramp' and 'prostitute' were prominently used throughout the comment threads repeatedly invoking Cyrus' sexuality. In analysing the landscape of Cyrus' representation within the girls' comment spaces they more frequently examined and debated Cyrus' sexuality in comparison to any other behaviour or topic. Furthermore these utterances emphasised Cyrus' sexuality as the most problematic behaviour. The frequency, intensity and focus of the girls' comments on Cyrus' sexuality is a distinctive feature of their comment space, and is characteristic of the differences in the parallel representations of Cyrus on the *Starblog* and in the girls' discussions.



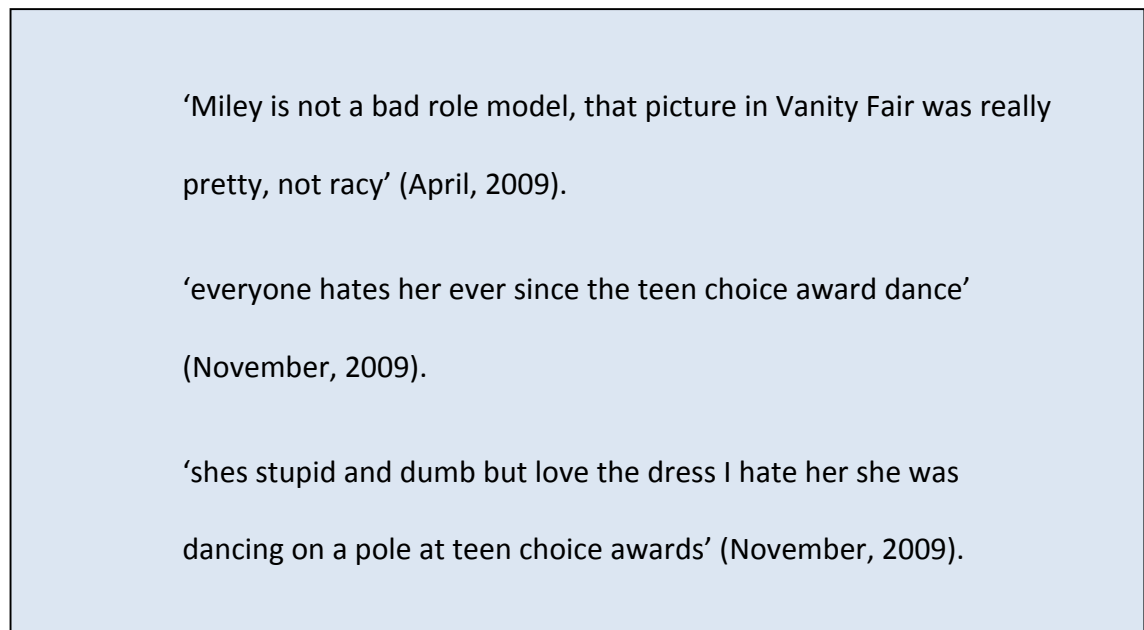


Figure 7-8 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

There were two events that the girls frequently referenced across the comment threads, Cyrus' photo shoot for Vanity Fair (2008) and her performance at the Nickelodeon Kids Choice Awards (2009). Typical examples of the inclusion of these events are illustrated in Figure 7-8 above. Girls continued to mention these events even in the latest comment threads published in 2013, despite the fact that these events occurred a number of years previously. These events were used by the girls as significant reference points for Cyrus' celebrity. The effect of the girls' continued use of these events from 'tween cultural memory' in relation to the construction of an alternative speech genre will be discussed later, here I explore why the girls reference these particular moments.

Each of these events received significant media attention and became key broader reference points for Cyrus' celebrity persona. As discussed previously in this

chapter the *Vanity Fair* photograph and Cyrus' performance at the Nickelodeon Teen Choice Awards became significant moments of media anxiety. The constant recollection of these events by the girls in the comment threads might be reflecting the emphasis placed on them by the media. Growing media and political anxiety over the effect of celebrities and celebrity culture on children were echoed in policy reviews during this time (Rush and La Nauze, 2006, Zurbriggen et al., 2007, Papadopoulos, 2010 and Bailey, 2011). Cyrus arguably became a public site for these concerns because of the timing of her sexual transgression of asexual tween boundaries. These broader social concerns might be reflected in the girls' comments because anxieties were focused on young (pre and early teen) girls who were Cyrus' audience.

'Where's The Little Inocent Miley We All Knew And Loved ..... ?;( It's  
Such A Disapointment ..... it really is :[ (May, 2012)

'I hate her. I miss the old miley' (June, 2012).

'I absolutely hater her and her Hair and Her Style. She used to be  
sweet Hannah Montana. But now, its drugs, smoking, tattoos,  
loads of piercings and crazy hairstyles. Not the Miley I knew and  
not the Miley I want. At all :P' (February, 2013).

Figure 7-9 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

'17 is too young. I know why she moved out so that she can have  
random guys in her bed' (May, 2010).

'I think she wants her own house to have cex!!' (May, 2010).

Figure 7-10 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

The girls' frequently mentioned a distinctive change in Cyrus' persona as demonstrated by the quotes in the Figure 7.9 above. The girls differentiate between the 'old' and 'new' Cyrus and for many of the commenters this was best articulated through the personas of Hannah Montana and Miley Cyrus. Sexuality is used by the girls to create and justify the division between her Montana and Cyrus personas. For example the first quote in Figure 7-9, 'Where's The Little Inocent

Miley We All Knew And Loved ..... ?' evokes the memory of a sexually innocent Cyrus. Discussions on the dichotomous understanding of female sexuality within a framework of the virgin/ slut have been explored by a number of authors (Aapola, Conick and Harris, 2005 and Bachechi and Hall, 2013) and are useful to draw on here. The binary of virgin/ slut discourses of female sexuality contextualise the girls' discursive representations of Cyrus, as in framing her persona through the Montana/ Cyrus divide the girls mirror the dichotomy of the virgin/ slut. These discourses of female sexuality theorise the way the girls' understand differences between Cyrus' personas, Hannah Montana and Miley Cyrus.

In the comment threads Cyrus' sexuality not only presents an arena for the girls' discursive representations of her, notions of sexuality also influence their readings of her celebrity trajectory. The effect of the girls' focus on sexuality is exemplified in the comment thread for the article 'Miley Cyrus' first home' (May, 2010) shown in Figure 7.10. This article reports that Cyrus purchased her first home. Many of the comments in this thread explicitly linked Cyrus' sexuality with the purchase of her house. The use of sexuality to contextualise Cyrus' trajectory from tween to teen is demonstrated by the quotes in Figure 7.10 above from this comment thread.

These comments are examples of how the girls have interpreted Cyrus' house purchase within the framework of her sexuality. In these quotes the girls articulate Cyrus' desire for sex as an adult behaviour, linked to gaining independence from her parents. The girls' use of having sex as an act of growing up in their comments supports Kelly's (2010) argument the loss of virginity is a meaningful marker of

adulthood. This example demonstrates how sexuality is a framework through which the girls understand Cyrus and is used to structure the (re) constitution of her celebrity from tween to teen.

'I used to like her, but she has been making bad decisions lately. & she seems kinda stuck up. I mean , im not a hater & I dnt personally know her, but seriously? Shes growing up waaay too fast' (May, 2010).

'Miley used to be kind and such a good role model for young kids, I remember waiting to watch Hannah Montana on Fridays and now she is far from that' (May, 2012).

'Miley you have changed too much ☹️I liked the old miley like the hannah miley!' (July, 2012).

Figure 7-11 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

In exploring the girls' representations of Cyrus it becomes clear that the Montana/Cyrus, or virgin/slut divide structured many of the girls' 'fandom trajectories' exemplified in the quotations in Figure 7-11. Moreover, these fandom trajectories were framed by nostalgia as they fondly reflected on Cyrus' Disney tween persona, Hannah Montana. This is demonstrated in the quotes in Figure 7-11 where one girl remembers 'waiting to watch Hannah Montana on Fridays' and another discusses her fandom of 'hannah miley'. Through using Cyrus' two personas the girls can

represent her as Hannah Montana and are able to frame her as a good role model who is deserving of their fandom. Dixon and Weber explore how children's play is nostalgically framed as, 'simpler, more innocent and less media- centred' (2007: 16). Nostalgia is used to reference a childhood in the past that is not affected by changes that threaten contemporary childhood. In articulations of their memories of Hannah Montana or the 'old' Cyrus, the girls revealed concerns for the boundaries of tween culture that are threatened by Cyrus' sexualised celebrity persona, a theme I discuss further in the next section.

Across the comment threads the girls' fandom trajectories followed similar patterns of ambivalence. The first quote in Figure 7-11 above illustrates conflicting ideas of fandom, the commentator mentions how she 'used to like her', goes on to describe her current behaviour as problematic but explicitly positions herself as 'not a hater'. Many girls articulate similar fandom trajectories distinguishing between the 'old' and 'new' Cyrus. Framing Cyrus' celebrity as two distinctive personas means that the girls can continue to be fans of Cyrus through Hannah Montana without having to legitimise her current behaviour. The structure of Cyrus' personas in the girls' discussions enables Hannah Montana to become a site for nostalgic tween consumption and justifies the girls' fandom of Cyrus. The distinction the girls' make between Montana and Cyrus is an important site for the emergence of their articulations of Cyrus' 'inappropriate' sexuality that I go on to explore in the next section.

**7.3.1.1. *Cyrus' sexuality as problematic: transgressing her  
'wholesome' tween role model status***

'I hate HM/Miley she is such a slut I hope she does leave she is a bad influence I mean shes such a hore I don't know why people like her' (April, 2009).

'Miley is a terrible role model. You're a teen only once. Why try to grow up fast and date 20 year old guys who use you?' (April, 2009).

'I don't lik her because she acts lik a sl\*\* and a ho\* and she sets a bad example 4 her fans and she thinks that okay 4 her fans 2 kno its okay' (February, 2009).

'Miley AWSOME breaking the law and dating a 20 yr old not so hot she needs to be a model for kids and not like all oohh look how awesome I am' (June, 2009).

'Miley used to be kind and such a good role model for younger kids. I remember waiting to watch Hannah Montana on Fridays and now she is far from that. She has taken nude pics and etc. If I was a mom I sure wouldn't want my kid wanting to following Miley' (May, 2012).

Figure 7-12 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

The extracts in Figure 7-12 demonstrate how gender, sexuality and age intersect in the girls' discussions of Cyrus' tenuous position as a tween role model. In each of the quotes above the girls articulate the responsibility they feel Cyrus has to her

young fans through using terms such as 'role model' and 'influence'. The girls draw on the Montana/ Cyrus dichotomy discussed previously and Hannah Montana is used as an asexual reference point for Cyrus' celebrity.

The girls' anxieties over Cyrus' role model status uncover their concerns that a biologically rooted, developmental discourse of girlhood is at risk of being distorted in two ways. First Cyrus is part of a tween culture that is asexual because of the pre teenage audience. Therefore her public displays of sexuality are inconsistent with her tween cultural position. As discussed in Chapter 2, Egan and Hawkes (2008) argue that the sexualised child is problematic because she blurs the boundaries of childhood and adulthood, as well as disturbing notions of child development.

Second, Cyrus' audience are assumed to be young girls because of her role in Hannah Montana and her celebrity trajectory within tween culture. The quotes illustrated above highlight the girls' powerful investments in the idea that Cyrus has significant influence over and effect on her fans. For example as one commentator argues 'she [Cyrus] sets a bad example 4 her fans and she thinks that's okay 4 her fans 2 kno its okay' whilst another states 'If I was a mom I sure wouldn't want my kid wanting to following Miley'. Furthermore articulations of the sexualisation of girls from contemporary policy, political and media discourses identify an underlying anxiety of precocious sexuality (Egan and Hawkes, 2008). Cyrus, as a sexualised girl, is at risk of corrupting her fans by awakening their (precocious) sexuality. The quotes above demonstrate the combination of Cyrus' young fan base, her tween role model status, as well as understandings of the effects of media on children frames her sexual behaviour as inappropriate. The boundaries of



'appropriate' tween girlhood are negotiated and policed by children through slut shaming practices that I explore in the following section.

Cyrus continues to be governed as a tween celebrity by the girls, even as she has moved out of this cultural space, as her tween persona is reproduced through the continued production of Hannah Montana and tween fans continue to consume this representation. The girls' consistent framing of Cyrus as a tween celebrity raises interesting questions over the lifecycle of the tween celebrity and her fans, I go on to explore some of these questions later in this chapter.

In these quotations the girls distance their consumption practices from Cyrus' sexualised persona. Drawing on Griffin's (1997) work on disordered consumption the girls, in their comments, frame other girls' consumption of Cyrus' sexualised persona as disordered. This is reflective of Bragg and Buckingham's work exploring parents' consumption of 'sexualised products' for their children. They argued that parents distinguished between others parents' disordered consumer choices and their responsible and justifiable decisions. The girls' similarly distance their consumption of celebrity culture from disordered consumption practices through their comments. I explore this argument further in the next section where I discuss the girls' slut shaming practices as a way of protecting values of asexual, white and middle class tween girlhood.

**7.3.1.2. *Girls' practices of slut shaming Cyrus: the governance of tween girlhood***

While the girls' opinions on Cyrus are not uniform there is more of a convergence over their attitudes towards her sexuality. The resonance of their utterances construct a more coherent discourse on the discussion and regulation of tween girlhood through their practices of slut shaming. The act of slut shaming has been discussed as emerging out of the sexual double standard, where men and women are subject to different expectations of sexual behaviour (Crawford and Popp, 2003). In her historical analysis Attwood argues that the "naming of the slut" became 'the work of women' who allied themselves with sexual aggressors rather than their victims' (2007: 234). In her discussion of its contemporary usage Attwood (2007) notes the use of the term 'slut' by girls within their peer group as a means of exclusion and branding. Similarly Aapola, Conick and Harris argue that 'girls themselves keep a close eye on each other and create distinctions between those girls who get it 'right' and those who get it 'wrong' (2005: 140). Furthermore slut shaming is a classed practice, a way of defining lower class sexuality (Attwood, 2007 and Jensen and Ringrose, 2014). Attwood (2007) discusses a number of ways in which the discourse of slut can be reclaimed by girls and women, while Reger (2014) argues that this opportunity is restricted to white femininity. However within the girls' commentaries on the *Starblog* alternative definitions were not negotiated for Cyrus and instead remain a process of slut shaming.

'miley is such a h\*\*e with those half naked photos of her on youtube'

(June, 2011).

'that \*\*\*\*ing slut thinks she can dance and thinks she can flip her hair like

Britney but naww she cant she just a stupid slut what is she gunna do

with her life!! Be an effing \*\*\*\* star?!' (January, 2009).

'wow she knows how 2 dance like a slut!' (January, 2009).

'her short shorts are too short!! Slu&' (May, 2010).

'Miley looks over-rated. Not Disney material, But I guess age changes us

all' (May, 2012).

'well the dress uis okay but with those boots? And really, shes a Disney

star not a \*\*\* and the City person' (November, 2009).

'Ummm Shes together with him again WOW..and those jeans make her

look trashy and like a complete waste fame \*tisk tisk tisk\* Shes like I don't

know but still she looks like a SSS---LLLL---UU-TT' (May, 2012).

'wow liam picked a wrong girl to get engage with? Shes a s1ut and a hill

billy' (June, 2012).

Figure 7-13 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

The girls' use of explicit language in their practices of slut shaming is striking as shown in the quotations above. There were three key sites for slut shaming, Cyrus'

celebrity trajectory, performances and clothing choices all of which are discussed in greater detail below.

In their discussions of Cyrus the girls draw on explicitly sexualised events from their counter discursive construction of Cyrus' celebrity trajectory. These comments often refer to Cyrus' photo shoot for Vanity Fair and her performance at the Nickelodeon Teen Choice Awards, which as I have discussed were significant events in the girls' counter discursive representations of Cyrus. The girls' constructions of Cyrus and their slut shaming practices are inflected with her location as part of southern culture in America. Kennedy (2014) argues that Cyrus' southern identity is produced through and reinforced by her father's reputation as a well-known country singer. Country music has particular cultural resonance and this has implications for Cyrus' persona in the *Starblog* comment threads. As Gritzner (1978) argues country music is viewed as unsophisticated, redneck and because of its 'down to earth' quality has a working class audience. Cyrus' heritage produced through her father Billy Ray Cyrus and her own position in a country music genre, are drawn upon in *Hannah Montana the Movie* (Kennedy, 2004) which locates her within a particular working class culture and a southern regional identity. As I go on to discuss later the girls' discourses of slut shaming are based in classed judgements that develop from this cultural position.

Performances, and in particular Cyrus' dancing, are a key focal point for the girls' practices of slut shaming. The second and third quotes from Figure 7-13 are spoken in relation to Cyrus' performance in her music video for the single *Fly on the Wall* (2008). In both examples the girls interpret Cyrus' dancing as sexualised. Their

association between forms of 'sexualised' dancing and sexual promiscuity is articulated clearly in the first quote which sees Cyrus' dancing as pornographic. The mainstreaming of the sex industry and the pornification of culture are highlighted by Papadoupoulos (2010) and Bailey (2011) as part of policy concerns for a 'toxic' culture that is threatening contemporary girlhood. The focus on Cyrus' inappropriate sexuality demonstrated through her dancing is based within these broader social anxieties over girls' bodies as sites for sexualisation.

Cyrus' clothing was another popular topic in the girls' discussions and a common site for slut shaming with one third of all comments on her clothing discussing their 'inappropriateness'. As the fourth, fifth and sixth quotes in Figure 7-13 above illustrate, the girls' comments often described Cyrus' clothing as too revealing and used this as a justification for considering them inappropriate. The girls' comments on Cyrus' clothing reflected similar concerns over inappropriate clothing discussed by the Bailey review (2011), as items with associations or markers of adult sexuality. Willett (2008) outlines contemporary concerns with girls' clothing, noting how particular items such as thongs, padded bras and high heels function as focal points for these discussions. Willett argues that these anxieties reveal fears of girls growing up too quickly, a fear replicated in death of childhood discourses (Postman 1994, Palmer, 2006), as well as anxieties of childhood innocence being inappropriately sexualised. On the other hand Willett notes how girls' clothing has also been presented as a mode of empowerment and as a way to express identity, reflecting *Stardoll's* articulation of girls' consumer based identity play that I discussed in Chapter 6. The girls' comments draw on this discourse of concern

identified by Willett and exemplified through the Papadoplous (2010) and Bailey (2011) reviews.

Cyrus' clothing choices were discussed by the girls as inappropriate for her as a young girl and for her status as a tween celebrity. The comments on age appropriate clothing were frequent and were met with little resistance from other commenters within the threads. Some of the girls used Cyrus' tween status to emphasise their opinion, as can be seen in the sixth quote, 'And really, shes a Disney star not a \*\*\* and the City person' (November, 2009). This quote not only highlights age but also draws attention to the significance of Cyrus as a Disney tween celebrity in determining whether behaviour or choices are appropriate. The use of Disney as a cultural signifier of childhood was evidenced throughout the girls' discussions and emphasises the meaning that is placed on *who* engages in sexual rather than intrinsic value of behaviour itself (Fischer, 2011). I return to exploring the issue of age in the comment threads in my discussion on Cyrus' role model status later in the chapter. The girls' comments on Cyrus' clothing speak to their understandings of girlhood as age divided. The separation of childhood into distinctive age stages discussed by (Buckingham, 2011) creates a framework through which the girls can judge actions, behaviour, or in this case clothing, as tween age appropriate.

Armstrong et al. argue that 'slut stigma is more about regulating public gender performance than regulating private sexual practices' (2014: 102). Jensen and Ringrose (2013) discuss the classed nature of slut shaming and alongside Attwood (2007) argue that these practices are embedded with class based moral judgements

and are enacted as a way of establishing status. Through their slut shaming the girls use class as a way of defining Cyrus' (inappropriate) sexuality and distancing it from themselves through disgust and disapproval. For example the last two comments in Figure 7.13 make explicit links between Cyrus' sexuality and class. In examining these quotes the use of the terms 'trashy' and 'hill billy' denotes a class position that is articulated alongside slut shaming, reinforcing a boundary between Cyrus and the girls who comment in the thread. In engaging in processes of slut shaming the girls manage to separate themselves by taking a middle class vantage point, which distances tween girlhood from Cyrus threatening behaviour. The girls' practices of slut shaming regulate Cyrus' gender, aged and classed performance as a tween celebrity.

Through engaging in slut shaming the girls distance Cyrus' behaviour from themselves and are also heavily invested in and defensive of a wholesome tween culture, which they perceive Cyrus as transgressing. In their practices of slut shaming the girls judge Cyrus for corrupting a wholesome tween culture, and their emotive responses communicate feelings of hurt and betrayal. Even as their explicit choice of language in the comment threads, for example 's1ut', '\*\*\*\*ing slut', 'h\*\*e' and 'SSS---LLLL---UU—TT', distance the girls themselves from 'appropriate' notions of tween culture they remain invested in governing the boundaries of 'wholesome' tweendom.

In their discussion on 'sexting'<sup>8</sup> Ringrose et al. (2013) argue that moral outrage at young girls' 'sexiness' sits in discursive contrast to the normalisation of the

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<sup>8</sup> 'Sexting' is sending sexually explicit images.

sexualisation of the female body. Girls' bodies are read as having the potential for sexuality and this dormant sexuality is regulated by discourses of childhood innocence. As a tween celebrity Cyrus' body is read by the girls as a child's body and is therefore inappropriately sexualised with behaviours, (such as dancing) markers (such as clothing) or associations with an adult sexuality, despite becoming an adult within the time frame explored. Within their articulation of Cyrus as a slut the girls position her as possessing 'agentful' sexuality rather than as a passive victim of exploitative sexualisation.

As evidenced by the quotations discussed in this section many of the girls' comments work to define Cyrus' sexuality as inappropriate through engaging in a process of slut shaming. I argue that the girls' slut shaming acts in the comment threads work to protect the boundaries of tween girlhood by regulating Cyrus' gendered, aged and classed performance as a tween celebrity.



**7.3.1.3. *Growing out of tween culture: attempts to articulate alternative discourses of sexuality***

'Its not surprising tht sh's going to be in Sluts and the City' (April, 2009).

'I knew she's a \*\*\*\*\*. Now it's confirmed' (April, 2009).

Figure 7-14 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

'It isn't like shes gonna have \*\*\* so its not to matue for her!!  
Maybe she wants to do more than Disney stuff in her life' (April, 2009)

'Some of you are right, she's changing her girly girl outfits, but she's trying to grow up!She's trying to be a little \*\*\*ier and get rid of her Disney image! And she is 16. She can do the SITC2 movie.' (April, 2009).

Figure 7-15 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

In the discussion so far I have explored the way that the girls consider sexuality to be a significant boundary between girlhood and adulthood and that Cyrus' increasing sexual persona transgresses this. In this section I want to explore an alternative articulation of Cyrus' sexuality made by a number of girls, who draw on notions of the commodification and commercialisation of female sexuality.

The girls often mentioned Cyrus' progression from a child to an adult celebrity. It was particularly common in the comments relating to the *Starblog* article 'It's official: Miley Cyrus in SATC 2!' (November, 2009), which confirms rumours that Cyrus will have a cameo in the *Sex and The City 2* film. The comments for this article present a focused case study for exploring some attempts to articulate a different discourse of sexuality. The comment threads for this article are relevant for this discussion because many of the girls assumed that *Sex and the City 2* would contain explicit sex scenes and this generated considerable discussion over Cyrus' career trajectory. Within their commentary on this article a distinctive counter discourse emerged from a small number of girls who tried to articulate an alternative discourse of Cyrus' sexuality.

Typical comments articulated in this comment thread are illustrated in Figure 7-14, where Cyrus sexuality is framed as inappropriate through practices of slut shaming. In comparison the comments in Figure 7.15 are examples of a counter discourse that attempts to reframe Cyrus' sexuality. The girls' articulations of an alternative discourse present sexuality as a normalised part of growing up rather than a distinct threat to her tween image. The second quote in Figure 7.15 draws on Cyrus' age (16 years old at the time) emphasising that she is no longer a child despite her

status in tween culture. Within these comments Cyrus' sexuality is normalised through a developmental framework and as a part of adolescence.

Both of the quotes in Figure 7.15 above draw on Cyrus' celebrity career as the reason for her public demonstrations of sexuality. The girls suggest that Cyrus' sexuality is a desirable or necessary element for her career progression so that she can move on from her Disney tween persona and 'do more than Disney stuff'. Their articulation of Cyrus sexuality, where she needs to be 'a little \*\*\*ier' to rid herself of her Disney persona, implies an understanding of a gendered celebrity culture. The expectation that girls will perform 'sexy' whilst maintaining their girlhood (sexual) innocence mean there is little distinction between what is acceptable and desirable sexuality and what is inappropriate, as Valenti argues, 'the desirable virgin is sexy but not sexual' (2009: 30). The alternative discourse presented by some of the girls, where sexuality is acceptable for Cyrus' celebrity persona, could be framed as empowering within a postfeminist culture where women's 'sexiness' is seen as a demonstration of their empowered position (as discussed by Gill, 2007). In the quotes above the girls discuss Cyrus' demonstrations of sexuality as an act that liberates her from her tween celebrity, so that she can do 'more than Disney stuff in her life'. Yet while there is an understanding in this discourse of the need for Cyrus' public performance of sexuality, her sexuality is not necessarily framed as an empowered personal choice as it might be constructed under a postfeminist sensibility as discussed by McRobbie (2007). Instead, even within this alternative discourse Cyrus' sexuality is articulated as a necessary part of her career progression.

However the attempts by some girls to articulate an alternative understanding of Cyrus' sexuality are overridden by discourses of concern that commands the discursive representation of Cyrus' celebrity in the comment spaces. Tensions between values of childhood and tweendom as asexual on the one hand, and the framing of Cyrus' sexuality as normalised within developmental discourses and understandings of celebrity culture on the other, hold Cyrus to the girls' double standards. Whilst within the girls' comments there may be some recognition that Cyrus is required to become sexualised and that broader cultural pressures frame this process, this is not a majority reading of her celebrity. The discourse of concern commands representations of Cyrus within the comment threads, as the girls require her to be sexually innocent in order to fulfil their expectations of her tween persona. This command of the girls' articulations of Cyrus' sexuality undermine potential postfeminist readings. Instead traditional notions of femininity frame the girls' understandings and are regulated through practices of slut shaming.

#### ***7.3.1.4. Moralising discourses of sexuality, girlhood and celebrity culture***

The girls' comment threads are situated with the articles on the *Starblog* and this celebrity gossip space frames their discursive representations of Cyrus' sexuality, as Cramer discusses 'popular culture provides a framework for ideas about sexual morality' (2007: 409). As explored by a number of authors (see for example Turner 2004, Holmes and Redmond, 2006 and Marshall, 1997), celebrity culture and the act of celebrity gossip are sites for the discussion and affirmation of values and

morality. Furthermore participation in moralising discourses is part of childhood. As Singer and Doornenbal argue 'moral assumptions or beliefs are embedded in children's daily activities, routines and procedural knowledge of interactions with their parents or peers' (2006: 228). In the case study examined in this chapter the girls' counter discourse of Cyrus provides a site in which they negotiate sexuality, childhood and celebrity culture through a framework of morality. Furthermore Valenti (2010) discusses how girls' virginity is conflated with ideas of morality becoming the defining characteristic of being a good girl. In the girls' articulations of sexuality most of their comments fall within what Cramer terms 'restrictive codes' meaning Cyrus' sexuality was seen as 'wrong or bad (unless confined within boundaries that make it acceptable, (for example) heterosexual marriage)' (Cramer, 2007: 411). In framing Cyrus' sexuality in this manner the girls infer her lack of morality.

Through the analysis in the second part of this chapter I have explored how the girls' use 'tween appropriate' values in their construction and regulation of Cyrus' sexuality. Their use of moral codes in achieving this underlines the vulnerable nature of Romantic discourses of childhood. As I have argued previously Cyrus' sexuality poses a threat to the middle class tween girlhood that *Stardoll* is part of. The articulation of the girls' concerned discourse illustrates their anxieties over the moral boundaries of girlhood, which are rendered 'at risk' by Cyrus' sexuality.

In this section the production of moralising discourse that create and regulate boundaries over what (other) children should know has been explored. Through the use of moral codes of sexuality in their counter discursive representations of Cyrus

the girls police boundaries over what is acceptable behaviour in tween culture. In articulating their concerns for Cyrus' effect on younger fans the girls distance themselves from this potential threat to their childhood. However within the comment threads there is also some allowance for negotiation of these morality claims (and the boundaries of moral assumptions), demonstrated by the articulation of Cyrus' sexuality as a necessary part of celebrity culture. In the next section I extend this discussion to explore how moral discourses are commanded and legitimised.

### **7.3.2. Tweens articulating 'tween speech'**

The emerging speech genre produced by the girls in the comment threads has distinctive speech rules for engagement. In this section I discuss the emerging rules of speech within the girls' comment spaces, focusing on three key features; the girls' command of discourse, the use of additional knowledge in the production of Cyrus' celebrity and the creation of a shared cultural history.

#### ***7.3.2.1. Commanding a moral discourse of tween girlhood***

The language, tone and topics of the girls' speech are distinct from the *Starblog's* 'tween speech' genre. The girls' expressions of Cyrus as breaking the rules of 'appropriate' tweendom, even as their own language removes them from tween appropriate culture, is read in comparison to the more neutral tone of the blog's

reports where Cyrus' 'transgressions' are met with silence. However through the girls' negotiations of Cyrus' celebrity and their practices of slut shaming they articulate values of sexuality and girlhood that overlap with the underlying principles that shape the *Starblog's* tween speech genre, explored earlier in this chapter. For *Starblog's* official and the girls' unofficial representational discourses of Cyrus' celebrity sexuality operates as a key boundary of 'acceptable' tween culture. However the *Starblog* moderates Cyrus' sexuality to conform to 'tween speech' on *Stardoll*, a tween website, whilst in the comment spaces the girls explicitly regulate Cyrus' sexuality, through practices of slut shaming.

In the previous section exploring the girls' comments I discussed the principal articulation of Cyrus' sexuality as problematic and considered an alternative discourse based on normative developmental notions produced by some girls. These discourses are subject to power relations within the comment space and moral discourses are enabled to command the representation of Cyrus. Readings of Cyrus' celebrity as problematic for tween culture experienced little resistance and were given more weight in the discussions, because they evoked a sense of moral order. The girls' sense and use of morality underscores certain understandings of Cyrus' celebrity and enables them to position themselves as policing the boundaries of acceptable tween girlhood. The command of discourse achieved through evoking moral codes in their practices of slut shaming is a feature of the girls' comment spaces. The authority of a 'concern discourse' that labels Cyrus' sexuality as threatening to the state of tween girlhood is established as a leading discourse in their interpretations, understandings, and governance of Cyrus' celebrity. However

the *Starblog* articles are also framed by the same moral notions of tween 'wholesomeness', which underlie the three distinctions periods of representation (or lack of representation). While both the official *Starblog* discourse of Cyrus and the girls' alternative representations of Cyrus' celebrity have distinct speech conventions they conform to the same tween cultural values based on moral notions of 'wholesomeness'.



**7.3.2.2. Knowledge and the construction of a counter discourse**

'shes not kool anymore she smokes and wont stop' (July, 2012).

'I don't really like her & with the scandal about the pictures & just the way she carries herself' (August, 2009).

'I used to like her but then she became a drunk and all that so I yea and was like u know wat I don't like u anymore' (May, 2012).

Figure 7-16 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

'I don't like her, she's trying to be so much older then she is. If you don't know what I mean, look at her party photos' (August, 2012).

'shes just a stuck up dirty thing u shud see her pics on google images its disgusting!' (July, 2009).

'type her name into google without safe search on' (May, 2010).

Figure 7-17 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

Celebrity gossip and knowledge that is additional to the content provided by the *Starblog* is a central aspect of the girls' counter discourse. The way that additional

knowledge of Cyrus' celebrity is used by the girls varies, at times this information is referred to as a general behaviour, for example in the first quote above the speaker refers to Cyrus smoking in a broad manner rather than in reference to a specific time. This was replicated across the girls' discussions even when specific examples of behaviour could be drawn on, such as the 'scandal' mentioned in the second quote. The 'scandal' is not clarified and could refer to a number of incidents. As I have already explored two events came to define Cyrus' celebrity in the girls' counter discursive representations, the Vanity Fair photo shoot and Cyrus' performance at the Nickelodeon Teen Choice Awards. These became important reference points for the girls' alternatively authored Cyrus.

In most instances it was assumed by the girls that other members of the comment community held the same additional knowledge of Cyrus' celebrity. This is evident in the final quotation in Figure 7-16 above, the commentator expects readers to know the context around Cyrus becoming 'a drunk and all that' in order to understand the comment and be able to respond appropriately in the comment thread. However there were examples where girls would share additional knowledge, as the quotes in Figure 7-17 above demonstrate. The girls position themselves as knowledgeable and assume some of the readers of their comments will be less informed. In the first two examples images of Cyrus' controversial moments are used as proof to back up the girls' opinions and letting the readers know where to find this information justifies their judgements. For example when discussing Cyrus age one commentator says 'if you don't know what I mean, look at her party photos'.

In contrast to the controlled tween speech genre moderated by the *Starblog* the girls' discussions in the comment spaces offer ways to gain additional, unmediated knowledge in order to participate in alternative representations of Cyrus. This feature of the comment spaces could be viewed as part of a collective process of knowledge sharing. As Jenkin's argues 'consumption has become a collective process' (2006:4), where individuals come together to share information creating a 'collective intelligence', a term borrowed from Levy (1999). Amongst the first explorations of online fandom Baym (1997) discusses the use of online forums as a site for the exchange of knowledge. Within her research on soap opera fan communities she argues there was a growing amount of knowledge that required the sharing of information. The Internet has facilitated new opportunities and for interactivity, for the girls on *Stardoll* this has enabled ways of knowledge to be exchanged and accessed. Throughout the comment space the prevalence of additional knowledge to the information provided by the *Starblog* illustrates the porous nature of online spaces. The examples discussed above demonstrate that girls do not simply bring additional knowledge of Cyrus into *Stardoll* but at times they pass on strategies to access it. This is exemplified in the final quote where the speaker suggests searching 'without safe search on'. However, while there is some evidence of elements of knowledge sharing in the comment community the majority of interaction assumes that readers and participants hold the same knowledge and understanding of Cyrus. Within the comment spaces of the *Starblog* exchanging information is not the principal use of the threads.

### 7.3.2.3. *Shared cultural history*

'Shes such a slut I hate her she WILL end up like britney and end up in playboy or something' (April, 2009).

She's sooo the next Britney Spears! And when ppl tell her that she takes that as a compliment!' (November, 2009).

'I personally think Miley is a good star but moving out at this age, shes gonna be Britney' (May, 2010).

Figure 7-18 Comments from the Starblog comment threads

The girls drew on a shared tween cultural history to contextualise and make sense of Cyrus' unfolding celebrity trajectory. They frame Cyrus within a broader discourse of 'tween celebrities' who are young, female and often produced and managed by Disney, such as actress Lindsey Lohan and singer Britney Spears. The comparisons to other tween celebrities were usually used to comment on Cyrus' increasingly sexualised public persona. The girls use shared cultural representations of other tween celebrities in order to contextualise and justify their opinions of Cyrus. For example the second quote above mentions Cyrus becoming the next Spears and states, 'when ppl tell her that she takes that as a compliment' this comparison draws attention to an interpretation of Spears as a previously failed tween celebrity. Understandings of tween and teenage sexuality permeate these

comments as Lohan and Spears are drawn on as references for out of control female sexuality. This is clearly seen in the first quote above, 'she WILL end up like britney and end up in playboy or something'. The final quote is written in response to the *Starblog* article reporting that Cyrus had purchased a house. In this comment Cyrus' sexuality as potentially becoming 'out of control' is eluded to through the reference to Spears.

Their knowledge of a tween cultural history influences the girls' reading of Cyrus, who they assume will follow a similar tween celebrity trajectory. The deterministic quality to the girls' understandings of celebrity is highlighted in the first quote where 'will' is capitalised. The common references to a broader shared cultural history of tween celebrities reiterate the transient nature of tweenhood. Strong's analysis of cultural memory is useful for understanding the role of a shared cultural history in the girls' speech. She argues, 'memory is so central to the building and maintenance of both individual and collective identity' (2011: 399). The girls' constant references to particular inappropriate moments in Cyrus' career and drawing comparisons with to other ex tween celebrities, who are presented as failing to make the transition from tween celebrity, reaffirms the boundaries of tween culture by distancing Cyrus' problematic behaviour. This shared cultural knowledge becomes a feature of the girls' speech genre in which they construct a counter discourse to the representations of Cyrus on the *Starblog*.

#### **7.4.Conclusion: Governing wholesome representations of Cyrus**

In this chapter I have explored two distinctive tween speech genres on the *Starblog*, the articles and the comment threads, where different discursive representations of Cyrus are located.

In the first part of this chapter I analysed how the *Starblog* moderated Cyrus' celebrity trajectory to be tween appropriate. I argued that there were three distinctive stages of Cyrus' representation on the blog. In the first period the *Starblog* emphasised Cyrus' Disney tween positioning. I then went on to discuss the lack of *Starblog* articles on Cyrus within the intervening 'quiet period' and what this implies in terms of the *Starblog's* 'tween appropriate' moderation. Finally I examined the third period where Cyrus was presented as Hemsworth's girlfriend and fiancée sustaining a romantic discourse throughout this set of articles.

Through exploring the shifting representations of Cyrus' celebrity trajectory on the *Starblog* I have analysed the construction of Cyrus' 'tween appropriate' persona. I argued that Cyrus' increasingly sexualised persona transgressed notions of tween girlhood as an asexual state. Breaking the boundaries of tween girlhood was problematic for the constitution of a 'tween appropriate' Cyrus on the blog because of her position within tween culture and the (assumed) tween age audiences of both her and the *Starblog*. Consequently Cyrus sexuality was moderated to fit in with 'tween appropriate' values. This case study investigating the constitution of tween celebrity raises questions about the 'life cycle' of tween celebrities and their

move out of tween culture. My analysis of the *Starblog's* representations of Cyrus in their articles contribute to literature exploring celebrity culture by providing a case study on the articulation of tween celebrity within a tween cultural space.

In the second part of the chapter I compared the *Starblog's* representation of Cyrus with the girls' counter discourse produced through their comments in the associated comment spaces. I argued that in contrast to the *Starblog's* representations of Cyrus, where she moves from an asexualised tween to framed within a romantic discourse, the girls explicitly use sexuality as a mode to explore, negotiate and regulate meanings of tween girlhood.

I analysed the function of sexuality in the comment threads as a structure for the girls' representations of Cyrus' celebrity and as a framework for their fandom trajectories. I argued that that these features defined the discursive representations of Cyrus articulated by the girls and constantly invoked her sexuality as a mark of transgression. As sexual innocence is a key characteristic of tween culture the girls' vivid discussions of sexuality disrupt the notion of tweens and tween speech as asexual. I went on to explore the girls' practices of slut shaming as a way that they regulate tween girlhood in particular classed and aged ways. Through their acts of slut shaming the girls distance tween culture and themselves through taking a middle class tween culture position, from Cyrus' threatening sexuality. I argued that the girls' discourses of concern, which emerge from anxieties over Cyrus' role model status and her potential influence over her vulnerable fans, commanded their representations of Cyrus because they draw on moral codes of sexuality and childhood.

The differences between Cyrus' representations in the *Starblog's* articles and the girls' comments were expressed through the distinctive ways they dealt with her sexuality. The *Starblog*, in their moderation of Cyrus' celebrity trajectory manage her sexuality through avoiding a discussion on her increasingly sexualised persona and framing her as 'tween appropriate'. On the other hand explicit interpretations and negotiations of Cyrus' sexuality were a key feature of the girls' articulations of her tween celebrity. Both discursive repertoires use sexuality as a significant boundary of girlhood and draw on this as a way of defining behaviour as 'tween appropriate' and were invested in similar notions of 'wholesome' tween culture. In this case study I have explored how girls' notions of 'tween appropriate' mirror broader discourses of moral concern over the state of contemporary girlhood.

I continue a number of themes I have set up in this discussion in the next chapter analysing the articulation of discourses of risk on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. Having set out the use of 'tween appropriate' values in the command of celebrity discourses I explore how these values are drawn on in the regulation of online spaces. Two defining aspects of tween girlhood which I have began to unpack, age and asexuality, continue to be analysed in the following chapter.



## **Chapter 8.      *Stardoll's* 'Safe Haven': Negotiating Risk Understanding, Management and Responsibility**

### **8.1.Introduction**

In this chapter I interrogate the construction and negotiation of discourses of risk on *Stardoll*. Extending my discussion from Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, I continue to examine *Stardoll's* construction of tween girlhood and the girls' negotiations of this cultural space. In this chapter I further these ideas to explore how the boundaries of tween identity are threatened and policed within online spaces through notions of risk using data from *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, a blog described in Chapter 4.

Interrogating *Stardoll's* construction of the website as a 'safe haven' and their articulation of discourses of risk, I argue that risk is structured within a neoliberal framework on the site. I examine how this positioning means that the site is distanced from responsibility and that parents, and to some extent girls, are presented with responsibility for risk mitigation. I go on to argue that the neoliberal framework on *Stardoll* requires the girls who author *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* to regulate risk in an individual or collective manner. I argue that whilst the girls enact a neoliberal attitude in their risk anxiety, management and responsibility, reminiscent of Harris' (2004) 'can do' girls, they campaign for greater regulation to be undertaken by *Stardoll* because they position other girls as vulnerable and 'at risk'. I suggest that the tension between neoliberalism and the

tween nature of the site arises from the construction of children as inherently vulnerable and as a passive audience, within a Romantic discourse of childhood.

This chapter draws on understandings of neoliberalism and risk discussed by Shirani (2012), Gill and Scharff (2011) and Jackson and Scott (1999), to explore the gendered and generational construction of risk for neoliberal social actors on *Stardoll*. Following on from the previous analytical chapters I draw on discourses of tween girlhood, in particular Harris' (2004) notion of the 'can do' girl discussed in Chapter 2, within a neoliberal, postfeminist framework. In addition this chapter speaks to the emerging field of digital childhood studies, in particular I use Haddon and Livingstone's (2008) categories of online risk set out in Chapter 3.

The chapter is divided into two parts, in Part 1 I investigate *Stardoll's* construction of risk and in Part 2 I examine the girls' discourses of risk through their blog, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. In Part 1 I examine a range of online safety information produced by *Stardoll* and presented to girls and their parents. In Part 2 I analyse blog posts and key articles published between 2008 and 2012 by *Stardoll* members on their blog, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*.

## **8.2.Part 1 *Stardoll's* safe haven: interrogating discourses of risk**

*Stardoll* locates itself as a 'safe haven' for girls online and prevalent discourses of risk and safety demonstrate this position. Here, I interrogate *Stardoll's* discourses of risk, examining how it is constructed as a 'safe haven' and analysing the complex discourses of risk responsibility. I argue that *Stardoll* is constructed as a 'safe haven' through prominent displays of safety, the design of the site and memberships and their 'One Stop Rules' that create a distinction between *Stardoll* and other online spaces. I go on to argue that *Stardoll's* discourses of risk are gendered because of their emphasis on potential contact risks online. I interrogate *Stardoll's* notions of parenthood and childhood in their articulation of risk. In doing so I examine *Stardoll's* contradictory discourses of risk responsibility where parents and girls are given responsibility for risk understanding and management. However I argue that parents are given ultimate responsibility for mitigating their children's risk because of assumptions about children's vulnerability. In this chapter I draw on the distinction between digital natives and children as 'at risk' that I outlined in Chapter 3 to explore the contradictory position of girls on the site. I argue that girls' inconsistent positioning by *Stardoll* is reconciled within romantic discourses of childhood.

In discussing *Stardoll's* articulation of discourses of risk and approach to online safety I first examine the construction of *Stardoll's* 'safe haven' through the design of the site and rules for member's participation. I go on to interrogate the

## Chapter 8 – *Stardoll's* 'Safe Haven': Negotiating Risk Understanding, Management and Responsibility

discourses of risk responsibility articulated on *Stardoll* examining their 'Online Safety Guide for Parents' and their advice given to the girls within a 'Active Girls' discourse.

### 8.2.1. Establishing a 'safe haven'

#### Stardoll Etiquette – The One Stop Rules

While you are on Stardoll, it is strictly forbidden to:

- Use bad words, sexually graphic terms or to make racist remarks.
- Bully other stardolls or in other ways make them feel uncomfortable.
- Share or ask for personal information such as password, phone number, email, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Polyvoe, ask.fm, Instagram or similar.
- Post external links or usernames.
- Make private deals or trades, share or sell accounts or sell items for more than 600 Stardollars.
- Type your password anywhere except in the log-in box on Stardoll.com (or any Stardoll apps) or change your email to any email address that does not belong to you.
- Claim to be part of the Stardoll Staff.
- Create or design items that may be offensive to others, including (but not limited to) cigarettes, weapons and drugs.
- Use proxies or hacks.
- Copy the original design of another stardoll

Figure 8-1 Stardoll's One Stop Rules

*Stardoll's* approach to online safety includes official schemes and a number of mechanisms developed by the site. *Stardoll's* participation in the United States' Privo Privacy Assurance Program (2001) is displayed on the site's homepage.

Inclusion in the programme demonstrates that *Stardoll* complies with the United States Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998. *Stardoll's* presentation of the Privo logo on the homepage of the site lends official recognition to the site's safety credentials.

*Stardoll* highlights its own actions to reduce unsafe experiences on the site through their moderation service. Moderation on *Stardoll* is accomplished in three ways. First a team of adult moderators monitor the site 24 hours a day seven days a week. Second *Stardoll* uses 'automatic moderation' to pick up on language that is prohibited. Third *Stardoll* has a 'report button' on all interactive areas of the site, members can use the report button to alert moderators to issues. *Stardoll* states that all reports are taken seriously and dealt with within one working day. The combination of adult moderation and the opportunity for members to report incidents presents both the site and members as responsible for *Stardoll's* 'safe haven', a division explored in more detail later.

In addition *Stardoll* offers two alternative forms of membership to the site. First *Stardoll* offers a 'kid safe' account that disables the member from producing any content on the site, accessing content written by any other members and communicating on forums or chat rooms. Second *Stardoll* offers a monitoring safety feature that links a child's account with their parent's account so any activity can be monitored. I go on to explore the discourses of risk and responsibility in *Stardoll's* moderation services and the design of membership in the next section.

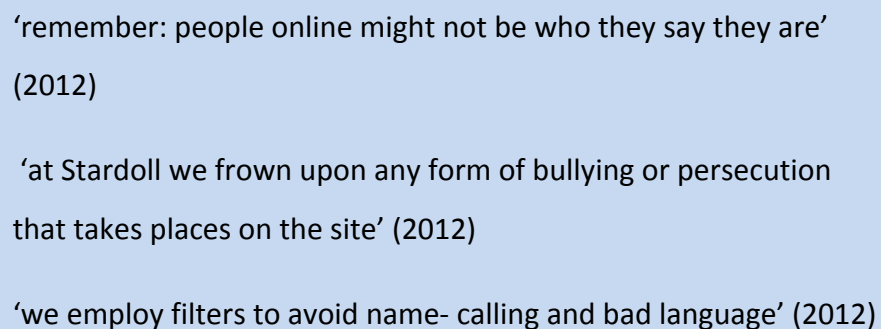
Finally *Stardoll's* membership guidelines, the 'One Stop Rules' illustrated in Figure 8.1 above, work to maintain the boundaries of the site's 'safe haven'. Members

agree to the 'One Stop Rules' when setting up their account and I focus on two of the rules that have implications for creating boundaries of *Stardoll's* 'safe haven'. The first rule is third on the list in Figure 8.1 above, *Stardoll* members are told that they should not share or ask for personal information and furthermore the rules explicitly mention not distributing this information on a number of social networking sites. The One Stop Rules reference particular social networking sites, Facebook, Skype, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram (2013); the final two sites Polyvoo and ask.fm are recent (2014) additions to the One Stop Rules. In choosing to reference these social networking sites *Stardoll* distances its tween cultural identity from potentially risky adolescent spaces online.

This separation between *Stardoll* and other online spaces is made more compelling because these sites have become focal points for a range of anxieties over children's, and in particular, girls' use of the Internet. Girls are considered 'at risk' on social networking sites, primarily from cyber bullying and paedophiles (for examples of media commentary see Pertusini, 2011 and Martin, 2012). I go on to discuss the gendered nature of online risk in later sections of this chapter. *Stardoll's* reflection of broader discourses of concern is mirrored in their recent choice to include ask.fm, which has been accused of facilitating cyber bullying and has been linked to a number of teen suicides (Shute, 2013). In the wake of Hannah Smith's suicide Prime Minister David Cameron called for a boycott of the website ask.fm because of cyber bullying fears (Coyne, 2013), amplifying these concerns for girls online.

The second rule maintaining *Stardoll's* 'safe haven' is illustrated in the fourth point in Figure 8-1 above, which restricts members from posting external links on the site. By containing the information members are allowed to post and preventing links between *Stardoll* and other (risky) social networking sites *Stardoll* can maintain its 'safe haven'. Locating the site as distinct from other spaces online *Stardoll* contributes to concerns of the Internet as a dangerous 'wild west' for children. *Stardoll's* construction of the website as a 'safe haven' is achieved in three ways: through displays of safety, the design of the site and membership rules which work to distinguish *Stardoll* as a safe space online.

### 8.2.2. Articulating contact risks on *Stardoll*



'remember: people online might not be who they say they are'  
(2012)

'at Stardoll we frown upon any form of bullying or persecution  
that takes places on the site' (2012)

'we employ filters to avoid name- calling and bad language' (2012)

Figure 8-2 Quotations from *Stardoll*

Particular kinds of risk are amplified by *Stardoll's* articulation of online risk and through their safety advice. As I discussed in Chapter 3 online risks have been categorised as contact, content, commercial and privacy (Haddon and Livingstone, 2008). In this section I explore *Stardoll's* emphasis on contact risks, which are those



concerned with interactivity online such as contact with strangers and cyber bullying. Reflecting on categories of online risk Pedersen (2013) argues understandings of risk are gendered. Girls are considered at risk from contact concerns (strangers and cyber bullying) and boys as at risk from content risks (pornography). The emphasis on stranger danger and cyber bullying on *Stardoll* reinforces a gendered hierarchy of risk to girls online where contact risks are presented as most threatening. In the following sections I outline *Stardoll's* focus on two contact risks, stranger danger and cyber bullying and argue that the site draws on a cultural commentary where girls are 'at risk' online in gendered ways.

#### Contact risks: stranger danger

The quotes in Figure 8-2 are from *Stardoll's* safety advice to girls. In the first quote, *Stardoll* members are positioned as trusting, innocent and 'at risk' from strangers. Established discourses of stranger danger are rewritten online because of concerns that identities cannot be verified. *Stardoll* exemplifies this in the first quote as they state people 'might not be who they say they are'. Jewkes and Wykes (2012) have traced the development of public concern for 'cyber-peads'. They argue that in moving online the reiteration of the 'stranger danger' discourse has become embodied by the 'dangerous stranger' who is imagined to be lurking in virtual spaces.

*Stardoll's* concern for members' potential contact with strangers is evidenced through the creation of the website as a 'safe haven' discussed in the previous

section and the One Stop Rules illustrated in Figure 8-1. Through the articulation of membership rules and setting boundaries of the space *Stardoll* reveals their concerns for girls' contact with strangers by insulating the site and members from this perceived threat.

#### Contact risks: cyber bullying

*Stardoll* frequently mention cyber bullying as a potential risk online and highlight their moderation structure to mitigate this risk. The second and third quotes in Figure 8-2 above demonstrate *Stardoll's* concern for cyber bullying on the site and states 'we frown upon any form of bullying'. *Stardoll's* approach to moderation is framed by their concerns for cyber bullying on the site, as they claim they use filters to 'avoid name- calling and bad language'. *Stardoll's* emphasis on cyber bullying as a potential risk for girls online reinforces the child audience of the site. The focus on cyber bullying as a potential risk online might, in a similar way to the stranger danger risk, be reflective of broader public concerns with bullying online. As already mentioned in this chapter there has been considerable public concern for cyber bullying on social networking sites.

##### **8.2.2.1. Mitigating contact risks**

Contact concerns are reflected in *Stardoll's* safety features and in additional membership options. First *Stardoll* offers a 'kid safe' account that disables a

member from producing any content on the site, accessing content written by any other members and communicating on forums or chat rooms. Concern for (potential) contact risks from interaction with other members underlies this feature. Second *Stardoll* offers a monitoring safety feature that links a child's account with their parent's account so activity on the site can be monitored. Moreover, *Stardoll* advises parents to know their children's passwords for the site and other websites. This advice contradicts *Stardoll's* 'Netiquette' where 'children as well as grownups should not read others email or copy protected material' (2013). This contradiction demonstrates that within a framework of contact risks concern for girls' safety is given priority over girls' rights to privacy online.

Reconsidering Haddon and Livingstone's (2008) categories of online risk *Stardoll's* emphasis is on potential contact risk for girls as discussed in this chapter so far. However in addition *Stardoll* mentions privacy risks and suggests girls should not give out personal information. *Stardoll* discusses content risks to a lesser extent because of the rules in place to stop any inappropriate content on the site. There is no mention of any potential commercial risks on *Stardoll* despite the embedded nature of advertising and advergames on the site, which I outlined in Chapter 6. The rules and mechanisms discussed in this section demonstrate *Stardoll's* emphasis on mitigating and avoiding potential contact risks on the site. Having discussed *Stardoll's* articulation of risk I go on to analyse *Stardoll's* division of risk responsibility and management in the following sections.

### **8.2.3. Division of risk responsibility on *Stardoll***

Having explored the construction of risk on *Stardoll* I now analyse two discourses of risk responsibility on *Stardoll*, on the one hand parental accountability and on the other girls' responsibility. The Byron Review argues for 'a shared culture of responsibility with families, industry, government and third sector all playing their part to reduce the availability of potential harmful material, restrict access to it by children and to increase children's resilience' (2008: 2). Notions of risk and safety produced by *Stardoll* appear to work towards this goal of shared responsibility, however in this section I deconstruct these discourses of safety and argue that parents are effectively given responsibility for risk management.

The girls who use the site and their parents are two distinctive audiences for different safety advice texts on *Stardoll* and within these discourses of risk and safety *Stardoll* assumes particular roles for parenthood and girlhood. Values of parenthood and childhood are structured within a neoliberal framework on *Stardoll*. The neoliberal context is described by Ringrose and Walkerdine as positioning subjects who understand 'themselves as responsible for their own regulation as 'free' and individual agents in the management of themselves as autonomous beings, which is central to a neoliberal project in which the community, the state, the sociality itself is taken to have melted away' (2008: 229). I examine how *Stardoll's* understandings of risk and safety are based on these values of neoliberal subjectivity, which are articulated in contrast to discourses of children as 'in progress' and not yet autonomous, underscoring parents' responsibility.

### **8.2.3.1. Parental responsibility**

The structure of *Stardoll* and other social networking sites position parents with varying levels of responsibility depending on the age of their children. 13 years old is often used as a distinction for membership to websites, where children under 13 years require parental consent to join, as is the case on *Stardoll*. The use of this age barrier creates a biological, age based distinction between childhood and adolescence in digital cultures. The use of the 13-year-old age marker also demonstrates a shift in parental responsibilities as children move from childhood to adolescence. However the general implementation of the 13-year-old age barrier has not stopped significant numbers of children under the age of 13 becoming members of social networking sites (Livingstone, 2010). While in practice the age barrier may be ineffective at stopping children under 13 years old joining without their parents' consent, it creates an effective way of locating the responsibility for younger children on the site as lying with parents. Therefore for girls under the age of 13 parents are positioned as gatekeepers to the site. Further to their role as gatekeepers parents can utilise additional safety features such as restricting or monitoring children's activities on *Stardoll*.

*Stardoll's* 'Online Security Guide for Parents': discourses of parenthood and childhood

'As in the real world you need to teach your child how to avoid risks and how to handle different situations.'

'Remember that personal computers and online services should not be used as electronic babysitters.'

'Please raise your child to become a good online citizen, to help us keep this a safe environment.'

'By taking responsibility for your children's online computer use, parents can greatly minimize potential risks of being online.'

(2013)

Figure 8-3 Quotations from *Stardoll's* Online Security Guide for Parents

There is a plethora of safety information for parents on *Stardoll*, including rules and features created by *Stardoll* and advice from professional bodies. A key part of *Stardoll's* safety advice is their *Online Security Guide for Parents* (2013) from which the extracts in Figure 8-3 above are taken.

*Stardoll's* guide for parents establishes risk responsibility as a parental role, for example *Stardoll* makes a comparison between online and offline parental

responsibility for risk in the first quotation in the above. Jackson and Scott (1999) argue that as part of broader discourses within a risk society parents are given risk responsibility for their children. Using established parental responsibilities offline concerning risk places the risk management role as a natural extension of 'good parenting'. The responsibility given to parents is evidenced in the final quote in Figure 8-3, 'by taking responsibility for your children's online computer use, parents can greatly minimize potential risks of being online' (2013). It is parents who can minimize risk rather than *Stardoll* despite their regulatory structures, such as 24 hour monitoring of the site.

The discourse of 'good' responsible parenting is contrasted with the image of the irresponsible parent, invoked in the second quote above: 'remember that personal computers and online services should not be used as electronic babysitters' (2013). In this quote *Stardoll* draws a distinction between responsible and irresponsible parents as those who take an active interest in the children's activities online and those who do not. The term 'electronic babysitters' implies an inactive, disconnected and irresponsible parenting approach, evoked in contrast to a responsible use of technology. The use of the phrase 'electronic babysitter' draws on a wider cultural commentary as part of the 'technologisation of childhood' that was set out in Chapter 3. Anxieties around technology are concerned with the erosion of boundaries between childhood and adulthood and these concerns have become heightened online as children are perceived to have access into adult spaces (see for example Elkind, 2001 and Palmer, 2007). Furthermore the technologisation of childhood contrasts with the Romantic discourse of childhood

that Taylor argues places children within the natural world and 'evoke an original higher order state of purity and innocence' (2011: 423). Concerns with 'electronic babysitters' disturb contemporary images of childhood that are based on the Romantic concept of children belonging to the natural world.

The discourse of responsible parenting is reinforced as *Stardoll* frames childhood as a period for becoming. The third quotation in Figure 8-3 draws on parents' task in creating future citizens and this is represented as part of responsible parenting 'to help us keep this a safe environment' (2013). The use of the term 'citizen' adds to the responsibility discourses articulated in *Stardoll's* guide for parents. Notions of children as 'becoming' reinforce parents' responsibility to protect their children in the present and their future selves (Scott and Jackson, 1999). Analysing youth culture Harris (2004) argues that there has been a shift in understandings of citizenship from a definition based on rights to locating it as founded on personal responsibilities. Within this framework citizenship can now be seen as achieved through active engagement. The notion that citizenship is an achieved position reinforces discourses of childhood as a period of 'becoming'. Framing childhood as a period for learning is part of broader Romantic discourses of childhood (Cunningham, 2006) and within this parents are given the role of guiding their children.

However within *Stardoll's* safety advice children occupy a contradictory position where they are situated as both 'at risk' and as potentially risky for other children. The contradiction is evident in the third quote in Figure 8-3 above, 'please raise your child to become a good online citizen, to help us keep this a safe environment'



(2013), which frames members' behaviour as potentially risky to *Stardoll's* safe environment. Frankel (2012) argues that the notion of children as simultaneously at risk and as potentially risky requires their management by adults, something that was achieved in earlier periods through moral education. Furthermore Shirani et al. (2011) note the assumption that parents, and in particular mothers, have control over shaping who their children become. *Stardoll* evokes the image of the risky child through the discourse of irresponsible parenting, in contrast responsible parenting, protects the 'safe haven' established by the site because girls are taught how to manage their own potentially risky behaviour.

*Stardoll's* safety advice for parents assumes that online activities are perceived as inherently risky for girls and that parents are responsible for their children's risk management. Throughout their advice *Stardoll* sets up a dichotomy between responsible and irresponsible parenting reinforced by a Romantic discourse of childhood. *Stardoll* compels parents to work within a neoliberal framework of self-surveillance, personal choice and responsibility. In doing so responsibilities that could be considered social, through *Stardoll's* moderation practices, are reimagined as personal as the preserve of individual parents. I now turn to explore a differing discourse produced through *Stardoll's* safety advice aimed at girls.

#### **8.2.3.2. Active Girls**

The girls on *Stardoll* are inconsistently positioned as both 'at risk' and as active agents within the online space. Girls are empowered by *Stardoll* to have agency on

the site, through the presentation of community rules, functions and activities. In this section I discuss how the mechanisms offered by *Stardoll* frame girls as neoliberal social actors. Neoliberalism, as discussed by Shirani et al., 'emphasizes individual responsibility and self management alongside a focus on managing risk' (2012; 26). Within similar traits Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities converge. Individual responsibility, self management and risk management are required in *Stardoll's* safety advice for girls.

#### Individual responsibility



Figure 8-4 Screen shot of Stardoll's Safety Quiz

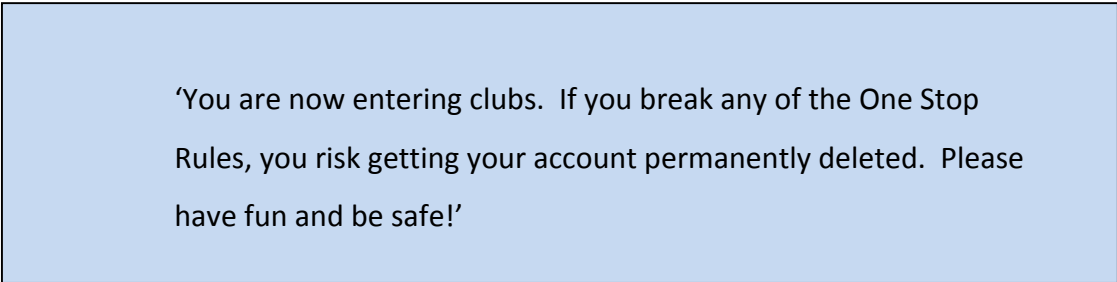
*Stardoll* positions knowledge and understanding of online safety as individual member's responsibility. The optional *Stardoll Safety Quiz* exemplifies this; the quiz is comprised of ten multiple-choice questions, a screen shot from the quiz is shown in Figure 8.4 above. On successful completion of the quiz girls are given a '*Stardoll Online Safety Diploma*' that can be displayed in their suite. The design of the quiz tests girls' knowledge and understanding of online risks and how they can be managed rather than teaching them this information. The format of the quiz engages girls with the information and requires them to take responsibility for their own knowledge and understanding. The use of the quiz reflects the importance of education for empowerment and choice within neoliberal postfeminism discussed by Koffman and Gill (2013). However the girls' sense of responsibility on the site extends beyond their personal safety to a collective responsibility for the space through *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, which I examine in Part 2 of this chapter.

### Self-management

Self-management is valued by *Stardoll* as a mechanism for the moderation of community spaces through the report button. Girls can use the button to report behaviour on any area of the site to a team of adult moderators. Self-management becomes the process through which girls can become active agents on *Stardoll*. Self-surveillance and the management of community spaces by the girls on *Stardoll* are framed as opportunities for members within the Active Girls discourse. The agency offered here is built into the structure of the site and this opportunity for self-management by girls is still subject to consideration, judgment and actions by

the adults employed to run the site. I discuss the girls' alternative negotiations of agency on *Stardoll* in Part 2 of this chapter.

#### Risk management



'You are now entering clubs. If you break any of the One Stop Rules, you risk getting your account permanently deleted. Please have fun and be safe!'

Figure 8-5 Quotation from *Stardoll*

The third trait is the prevalence of discourses of risk and risk management advice on *Stardoll*. Presenting the online space as one of potential risk is embedded throughout the site, for example on entering the clubs space girls are greeted with the message shown in Figure 8.5 above. In navigating the site the risky nature of being online is frequently invoked. It is within this environment that advice on strategies for risk management is given to the girls from *Stardoll*. The moderation service is promoted to girls and their parents as a key way that potential risks are managed on *Stardoll*. Risk management advice is also evident in questions in the *Stardoll Safety Quiz* where the focus is on understanding potential risks and knowing strategies for managing these. Advice for managing risks is also demonstrated throughout the *One Stop Rules*, where *Stardoll* advises girls not to give out any personal information on the site. *Stardoll* requires girls to read and

confirm their reading of the *One Stop Rules* when they sign up for membership and again on entering any interactive spaces on the site such as chat rooms. This repetition reinforces the notion that online spaces are (potentially) risky.

The neoliberal subjective engagement required of girls on *Stardoll* is one of self-surveillance, risk assessment and empowerment. The neoliberal values in the Active Girls discourse reflects Harris' (2004) 'can do' girls discussed in Chapter 2 as girls can achieve 'can do' status by making good (responsible) choices and personal effort. However this discourse is articulated in contrast to *Stardoll's* notions of parenthood where notions of risk responsibility are formed through Romantic discourses of childhood vulnerability.

#### **8.2.3.3. *Active Girls? Divisions of responsibility on Stardoll***

*Stardoll* locates parents and girls as neoliberal agents in their assumed understanding of risk and ability to manage risks online, both are tasked with undertaking surveillance and each is given (differing) responsibility. The way that girls' agency on *Stardoll* is structured presents them with an opportunity to learn and practice these overarching neoliberal attitudes and behaviours in the process of becoming adult neoliberal citizens. The understanding of risk, risk management, self-surveillance and responsibility are important values that are central to this subjectivity project. However the girls' agency could be considered an illusion on *Stardoll* because their parents are presented with ultimate responsibility for the surveillance and management of their girls' risks online. Presenting responsibility

as part of a parents' role, over girls' agency, reflects Romantic understandings of childhood, where, despite potential for neoliberal self regulation children are positioned as in need of protection by adults. However in setting up their blog *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the girls challenge the lack of real meaningful agency that they experience on *Stardoll*. The implications of their activities on the blog for understandings of girls' agency are interrogated in Part 2 of this chapter.

#### **8.2.3.4. *Digital natives or at risk?***

'Our experience is that many of our young users are very aware of the ethics online, and react when someone breaks the rules.'

'Netiquette is the informal code of conduct for the internet'

'By taking responsibility for your children's online computer use, parents can greatly minimize potential risks of being online.'

'Find out if your child has a free web – based email account, and learn their usernames and passwords'

Figure 8-6 Quotations from *Stardoll's* Online Security Guide for Parents

Discourses of risk on *Stardoll* draw on constructions of children both as digital natives and as 'at risk' as discussed by Holloway and Valentine (2003), outlined in Chapter 3. In the discussion so far I have explored how girls are positioned as 'at

risk' online and in need of their parents' protection, whilst at the same time they are given agency to understand and manage risks. These contradictory discourses are articulated simultaneously in *Stardoll's* Online Security Guide for Parents.

Figure 8-6 lists two quotes from the Online Security Guide for Parents, which exemplify both discourses of digital girlhood. In the first quote *Stardoll* suggests that girls 'are very aware of the ethics online, and react when someone breaks the rules' (2013). In this quote girls are considered part of the digital generation, as they know the ethics of online interaction and react to this accordingly. Their parents however, are not digital natives and therefore require an understanding of *Stardoll's* 'netiquette'. However at the same time *Stardoll* suggests that parents learn their children's usernames and passwords so that they can monitor their activities and interactions. In this quote the notion that girls are 'at risk' online is evident as they are seen as in need of protection by parents and not afforded agency to regulate themselves.

While *Stardoll's* positioning of girls might seem somewhat contradictory it is possible to see how these two discourses of children online can be reconciled. Girls, in both instances are presumed to be naïve and intrinsically innocent and moral. In the first case this is framed as a positive innate trait, and therefore girls can be considered active agents in their own activities or interactions. However in the second example girls' assumed essential state of innocence and naivety is seen as putting them at risk, as such they are now positioned in a more passive role in relation to their risky situation. Both draw on the discourse of innocence as part of Romantic conceptions of childhood, which is central to contemporary constructions

of childhood (Meyer, 2007), where children are cast as virtuous, pure and innocent whilst simultaneously immature, weak and vulnerable. It is this mix of traits within a Romantic innocent childhood that calls for children to be protected.



#### 8.2.4. Part 1 Conclusion

The complex and sometimes contradictory discourses of risk on *Stardoll* are based on understandings of childhood and parenthood. The focus on online safety throughout the site and in particular directing guidance towards parents positions *Stardoll* as a tween site, a place where explorations of a social networking site can be done in a managed and protected way.

While *Stardoll* prominently displays its safety credentials and information on safety content, which gives the site the illusion of a parental figure, these discourses remove responsibility from the site and primarily place it on parents and to some extent girls. In their articulations of risk *Stardoll* assumes that to some extent an adult monitors the girls' online activities and therefore can be given responsibility. In contradiction however, girls are afforded some resilience to these risks as well as agency in understanding and managing them. Framed by broader conceptions of contemporary society as one characterised and defined by its risky nature, it is girls who are best positioned to manage the space within neoliberal discourses however because of their vulnerable position as children they are not responsible for risk. Through the articulations of *Stardoll's* safety discourses girls are positioned both as digital natives and at risk. Having set out the discursive construction of risk and safety, and discussed *Stardoll's* articulations of parenthood and girlhood, I now turn to *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* to explore girls' experiences of risk and safety on the site.

### **8.3.Part 2: Girls' governance of risk on *Stardoll* through *The Ugly Side of Stardoll***

As I discussed in Chapter 4, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is a blog established and authored by a number of *Stardoll* members. The data for Part 2 of this chapter comes from my analysis of the blog, focusing on blog posts and articles from 2008 to 2012.

Having set out the construction of risk on *Stardoll* in Part 1 I now turn to explore the girls' understandings and negotiations of these discourses of risk through their blog, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. I examine the girls' understandings of risk, their strategies for risk management and their notions of risk responsibility. Continuing my analysis of the construction of online risk in Part 1 of this chapter I argue that the girls' expressions of risk anxiety are nuanced, at times reflecting *Stardoll's* focus on contact risk, and at other times articulating alternative concerns. I extend my discussion in Part 1 of the neoliberal values that shaped discourses of risk on the site. I argue that the girls enact the values of neoliberal subjectivities discussed in Part 1 through establishing the blog, developing peer-to-peer safety mechanisms to manage risk and articulating a Go Girls discourse of empowerment. However whilst their behaviours could be considered to fit within a neoliberal framework I argue that this is a reaction to the neoliberal culture on *Stardoll*, and that the girls argue for increased regulation on the site from *Stardoll*.

Following from Part 1, in this part of the chapter I draw on understandings of neoliberalism to explore how the girls construct risk in a different way to *Stardoll* (Shirani et al., 2012; Gill and Scharff, 2011; and Scott and Jackson 1999). In addition I draw on the concept of social capital. Social capital has been used to theorise a range of topics, however generally these discussions have not explored children's own social capital and how these networks may benefit them in the present (Leonard, 2005). Using the concept of social capital I explore how the girls rely on their networks for risk management and discuss how this might be the way that age operates on the site.

I begin Part 2 of this chapter by outlining the content and style of *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* blog before examining three aspects of risk within a neoliberal framework (Shirani et al., 2012; Gill and Scharff, 2011). First, I explore the girls' understanding of risk on *Stardoll*, in this section I analyse three different categories of risk, privacy, content and contact. Second, I explore the girls' peer-to-peer mechanisms for risk management. Third, I discuss their complex discourses of responsibility, investigating their understandings of individual, collective and *Stardoll's* risk responsibility. Drawing the discussion together I consider how the girls' demonstrations of each of these attributes through their activities on the blog might be considered evidence of a neoliberal, postfeminist subjectivity.

### 8.3.1. The Ugly Side of Stardoll



Figure 8-7 Screen shot of The Ugly Side of Stardoll's homepage

'hmm if only stardoll read this blog huh? They wud see wot REALLY goes on in there 'safe & secure site'!!'

'WATCH OUT, scammers, hackers, and all other Stardoll creepers! I am coming to get'cha!'

Figure 8-8 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

As I outlined in Chapter 4, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is a blog set up and maintained by a group of *Stardoll* members. The blog was established in response to some members' criticisms of *Stardoll*. In particular the girls were concerned with behaviour that was tolerated on the site. These issues are discussed in more detail

later in this chapter. The blog operates as an alternative space for safety advice, for members to explore their concerns and solve problems.

The blog's name *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* defines it as a space created in response to issues on *Stardoll*. The choice of purple for the background colour of the blog marks the space as girly and reflects *Stardoll's* pink and purple colour scheme. The blog's tagline, illustrated in the banner above, 'shamed, pictured and framed' reveals the role of the blog in naming and shaming a range of 'inappropriate' behaviours on *Stardoll*. The striking image appearing on the side of the banner is displayed prominently when entering the blog site. The use of a silhouette of a woman holding a gun in a confident pose conveys the tone of the site as confrontational and vigilante. The image is sexy, the woman is posed with her legs apart and her arm on her hip, this sexiness reinforces the gendered space the reader is entering and alludes to an empowered femininity, a particular subjectivity that is explored in this part of the chapter. Furthermore the choice of image reflects the girls' own position as community protectors. The quote in Figure 8-8 is an extract from a blog post on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The author's frustrations with *Stardoll* because they do not know what happens on their 'safe & secure' site are illustrated in this quote, and reflected throughout blog posts. In articulating *Stardoll's* lack of knowledge about what happens on the site the blog is positioned as a space for authentic knowledge of *Stardoll*. The quote highlights the discord between the girls' experiences on *Stardoll* and *Stardoll's* own discourses of the site as a 'safe haven' discussed in Part 1 of this chapter.

### **8.3.2. Girls' understandings of risk on *Stardoll*: privacy, content and contact**

I discuss three categories of risk defined by the girls on their blog, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, privacy, content and contact, again drawing on Haddon and Livingstone's (2008) definitions. The girls established the blog to deal with the issue of scammers and hackers that are part of privacy risks discussed by Haddon and Livingstone. The girls' concern for privacy risks continued throughout the blog and they wrote hundreds of articles on this topic, as a result the majority of blog posts deal with these issues. Many of these articles 'named and shamed' perpetrators, a practice I discuss later, and provided advice or support for dealing with privacy risks. However a number of other concerns began to be discussed on the blog, that can be broadly defined as content and contact risks. I now explore the girls' understandings of these categories of risk in turn.

### 8.3.2.1. *Privacy risks: scamming and hacking*

'u want 2 download 'something' 2 my Stardoll... ur not gonna hack me...!! Of course hunnie! Even a monkey wundt fall 4 this!'

'Im sure most of you will know its just some idiots new way of hacking but some of the younger sd gals would really belive this! Grr Why on earth are Stardoll not deleting these loons!'

'o come on! This is just getting silly now! So many younger people will believe this crap I bet the hackers r havin a piggin party!'

Figure 8-9 Quotations from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

Scamming and hacking are terms used by the girls on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* to describe forms of theft on the site. Part of the unofficial ways the girls play on *Stardoll* involve giving other members access to their account in order to give make overs to their dolls, redesign their suites or dress up their dolls. Furthermore members borrow clothing from one another through this play. When discussing scamming and hacking concerns the girls are referring to requests by other members to have access to their account details in order to play in these unofficial ways.

There are two distinctive and contradictory discourses of risk in the girls' articulations of scamming and hacking. The first quote in Figure 8-9 is typical of the

approach and tone the girls generally take to reporting privacy risks on *Stardoll*. As in this case the writers often adopt a sarcastic tone in discussing attempts at scamming and hacking and reject potential hacking scams as obvious. This tone is evidenced in the first quote above where the author of the blog claims, 'even a monkey wundt fall 4 this!' In their rejection of potential scams as obvious the girls position themselves as knowledgeable and able to spot privacy risks on *Stardoll*.

However there was a subset of the girls' blog posts reporting scamming and hacking on *Stardoll* that had a distinctly different approach because of their concerns for younger members. The second and third quotations in Figure 8-9 illustrate this subset. In both extracts the author discards the scam, in the second quote the author argues that the scam is 'just some idiots new way of hacking' and in the third extract the author calls the scam 'this crap'. However in each extract there is an underlying concern that these scams present a risk for younger girls. In this discourse of concern younger *Stardoll* members are portrayed as gullible, naïve and 'at risk' from scammers. The girls' concerns for younger girls are reproduced across the blog and throughout categories of risk as I explore in the following sections. The contrasting tones reporting privacy risks on *Stardoll* locate the girls' perception of other girls' susceptibility to online risk as age or developmentally based.

Framing scamming and hacking as a risk only when discussed in relation to younger members has further implications for their discussions on how *Stardoll* should be regulated. The second quote exemplifies this; in focusing on younger *Stardoll* members who may believe the scam, the girls' concerns and calls for the site to act are validated. The authors of the blog posts distance themselves from these



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potential risks on *Stardoll* by defining themselves as older and knowledgeable. The girls repeatedly constructed distinctions between themselves and 'at risk' younger girls, discussed throughout this chapter.

### 8.3.2.2. *Content risks*

The following quote is in response to an advert for a Jackass film.

'Stardoll is a KIDS website and yet Stardoll staff let someone advertise a rated 18 film on there, more importantly with a link to the film so anyone can watch it?'

The following quotation is in response to a *Starblog* article 'Kate moss portfolio at danziger'.

'The picture is showing her breast!!! Although I think it looks nice (not her boob the rest) I am appalled by Stardoll! There are like 7 year olds on this and there showing this on the site!!! I'm just speechless'

The final quote is in response to the membership name 'Retarded-me' on *Stardoll*.

'If this person really is mentally handicapped then I am very sorry, but joking about this is unacceptable. Targeting people with disabilities is a harsh reality in the world, lets not bring it to Stardoll and teach young children to do it too'

Figure 8-10 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

Figure 8-10 illustrates three examples of the varied ways that content on *Stardoll* is defined by the girls as inappropriate and presented on the blog as problematic. I

examine these examples before turning to sexual knowledge as a separate category of content risk because of its proliferation on the blog.

In signifying understandings of age and concern for childhood the girls reinforce *Stardoll* as a tween site, and as such a 'safe haven' from adult content. In Part 1 of this chapter I discussed *Stardoll's* construction of a 'safe haven' outlining their creation of boundaries between *Stardoll* and other online spaces. The girls' concerns that *Stardoll* remains a 'safe haven' are evident in their criticisms of the porous boundaries of the site. Each of the examples in Figure 8-10, an 18 rated film, revealing images and offensive language, illustrate the girls' concerns that 'inappropriate' content infringes the 'safe haven' on *Stardoll*.

First, in the blog post reporting the advert for the Jackass film on *Stardoll* the author argues that the inclusion of the link is especially problematic because 'anyone can watch it'. Members, who because of *Stardoll's* target audience are likely to be under the age of 18, are presented with a link to age inappropriate content by the site. The web link connects *Stardoll* to other spaces online which may present girls with age inappropriate content risks. Their concern highlights an underlying anxiety about the Internet as an unregulated space reflecting a cultural commentary discussed in Chapter 3, which articulates the Internet as not a space for children. Instead the Internet is discussed as an adult space where areas for children need to be policed.

In the second example the author criticises content that has been published by *Stardoll* staff members on the *Starblog*. The author of the blog post indicates that her concern is for the revealing nature of the image that shows Kate Moss' breast.

Again age is explicitly used in this example to highlight the inappropriate nature of this image for *Stardoll*. Using other girls' (assumed) young age as a way of expressing concern with content evokes *Stardoll's* position as a tween site.

In the final example the author comments on the use of an offensive membership name and raises her concerns that younger members might copy the language. Following the pattern of the previous examples the author uses age to justify their concerns and define this membership name as inappropriate content. The girls' notions of *Stardoll* as a 'safe haven' is once again articulated as the author argues that 'targeting people with disabilities is a harsh reality in the world, let's not bring it to *Stardoll*', separating *Stardoll* from other spaces online and offline.

Despite the differences in the content of each of the examples, an advert, a *Starblog* article and a membership name, the girls have defined each as 'inappropriate' content on *Stardoll*. The girls' outrage over age inappropriate content is emphasised in their choice of words such as 'speechless', 'appalled' and 'unacceptable', which are effective at communicating their concern. Moreover capitalising 'KIDS' in the first example highlights the importance of age to defining what is appropriate on *Stardoll*.

These concerns are articulated as content risks on *Stardoll* and demonstrate the girls' perception of other (younger) girls as a passive audience. In each example discussed above the girls focus their concern on younger girls because their notions of children as vulnerable and impressionable are amplified within a 'media effects' discourse. The last example demonstrates this concern as the author argues that younger children might be taught inappropriate behaviour from content on

*Stardoll*. The girls draw on Romantic conceptions of childhood (Meyer, 2007) and combined with their concern for the effect of media on a passive audience content risks on *Stardoll* are articulated as a risk for younger girls. Each of the content concerns discussed in this section draw on the girls' imagined boundaries of *Stardoll* as a tween site. Across the girls' concerns with content risk on *Stardoll* the use of age and specifically the image of a younger naïve audience was evoked. Having examined the girls' broad articulations of content risks on the blog I now discuss how they constructed sexual knowledge as a content risk.

Sexual knowledge from *Stardoll* members

'This comment left in my gb (guestbook) is beyond disgusting!!! He makes me actually feel sick!! Also y come straight 2 me??? But then again id much rather it be me than 1 of then younger gals on here!!'

'Well Stardoll is officially a sicko magnet! I mean come on ffs!!! There are young girls on there!!!! This is getting ridiculous!'

'on it was a 'person' called beautifulhotlez... the content of this guestbook should be rated 18+ because I have honestly NEVER seen anything like this. Gawd I don't need Sex Education at school with some of the stuff on Stardoll lately.'

Figure 8-11 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

In each of the extracts above the girls report that sexual content has been found on *Stardoll*, in the first two instances in private messages and in the last in a member's name and guestbook. The girls' concerns for sexual knowledge on *Stardoll* were frequently voiced and the content of sexual knowledge was often explicit. The girls' concerned outrage in receiving these messages is clearly communicated in the quotes in Figure 8-11 above with their choice of emotive language such as 'disgusting', 'sick' and 'sicko magnet' as well as the use of exclamation marks.

Continuing the pattern of using age to articulate concern for content risks the girls' highlighted younger members as being 'at risk', this is demonstrated in the first two examples above. As I explored in Chapter 7 sexual knowledge is a significant boundary between childhood and adulthood (Buckingham, 1999; and Meyer, 2007). Similarly to the girls' discussions of Cyrus' sexuality rendering her tween 'inappropriate', sexual knowledge is policed by the girls who write for the blog as a boundary of tween girlhood. Their identification of sexual knowledge as a significant content risk for (other) tween girls highlights the fragility of the tween state.

The girls' use of age in defining content on *Stardoll* as risky works to maintain distance between the girls who write the blog, and the younger girls who are at risk. In the first extract of Figure 8-11 the writer suggests that she can handle the sexual content of the message, whereas younger girls, because of an inherent vulnerability are at risk. Falling into similar patterns throughout the site the girls distance themselves from this risky status of being a younger member. The girls

position (other) girls as potentially 'at risk' in their discussions of a range of content risks on *Stardoll*.

#### **8.3.2.3. *Contact risks***

The girls' discussions of contact risks on *Stardoll* covered a range of behaviours. Whilst there are more blog posts on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* concerning scamming and hacking on *Stardoll* the increased reporting of contact risks on the blog over time reflected a significant change in tone and concern. In contrast to their reports on scamming and hacking, where the girls often took a humorous approach, when mentioning any form of contact risk the girls' posts conveyed a sense of outrage and concern. The use of emotive language when reporting contact risks reflected this tone for example, 'real perverts', 'Sick-O!' 'disturbing', 'creep', 'filthy' and 'pedo'. Within the girls' identification of contact risks they articulated fears of paedophilia online and raised particular concerns over the use of *Stardoll* as a dating site.

Lurking paedophiles

'now yes I no it could be some kid bein stupid...but... it could jus as easily be some dirty old man!'

'why does it seem so many boys even join Stardoll? Well, for this one, it's a pedophile site! Stay away!'

Figure 8-12 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

The first quote in Figure 8-12 above is taken from a blog post titled 'Stardoll is a DATING SITE for this sicko!!!!!!!!!!!!!!' in which the author 'names and shames' a member for sending a message proposing a date to another member. The quotation from this blog post illustrates the girls' concerns with paedophilia, as she writes that he could be a 'dirty old man'. The discourse of paedophilia on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* reveals the girls' distrust of interaction and heightened concern for contact risks. A broader understanding of contact risks discussed by Haddon and Livingstone (2008), including for example cyberbullying, is replaced by a focus on 'stranger danger'. In contrast to discourses of risk articulated by *Stardoll* the girls do not mention cyber bullying.

The second quotation is a blog post written in response to the author receiving a private message with the following text, 'hi I really like you'. The message was sent



by one of the few male avatars on *Stardoll*. The message is read by the author of the post as a potential contact risk and she warns her readers that boys join *Stardoll* because they might be paedophiles. This quote reflects the girls' understanding of *Stardoll* as a young girlie space within which boys are out of place.

The girls' concerns for stranger danger on *Stardoll* are articulated within a broader cultural concern with the potential for paedophilia online. Jewkes and Wykes (2012) identify a shift away from the 'real world' to virtual spaces as sites for sexual abuse of children. The inability to confirm identities online heightens concerns for stranger danger in digital spaces, a concern reflected in the first quote in Figure 8-12, where the messenger could 'jus as easily be some dirty old man'. The girls' anxieties about stranger danger reflect *Stardoll's* emphasis on this concern in their safety advice where they remind girls, 'people online might not be who they say they are' (2013). As I have discussed in the previous sections the girls' concerns for privacy and content risks were justified through evoking the notion of a vulnerable younger audience. However their concerns for younger girls are amplified when they discuss contact risks because their vulnerability intensifies their risk status.

*Stardoll* as a dating site

'Seriously these people should be banned from broadcasting...They do know 6 year olds go on Stardoll, right?! I'm all for people making friends and meeting online; I mean, my friends' parents met online on a chat room 20 years ago and they're still married happily today, but you're not on Skype or Oovoo, you're on STARDOLL! A '*safe haven*' for little girls (and boys)!'

'Just disgusting! It's a fashion site not a dam internet kids dating site!!'

'WHAT HAS THE WORLD COME TO! ESPECIALLY THE STARDOLL WORLD! I found another completely inappropriate Stardoll advertisement. A dating advertisement on a site for kids!!!! Im seriously getting worried about Stardoll...'

Figure 8-13 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

Throughout the blog posts the girls' perception of *Stardoll* being utilised as a dating site was a significant concern for them. The quotes in Figure 8-13 above are from blog posts reporting members for using *Stardoll* as a dating site. The girls identify *Stardoll* being used as a dating site through various functions of the site such as private chat messages, posting in members' guest books and broadcasting<sup>9</sup>. Similar

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<sup>9</sup> Broadcasts are public messages on *Stardoll's* home page.

patterns of the girls' articulation of risk anxiety emerge as the girls distinguish *Stardoll* from other online spaces and draw on values of childhood.

The quotes in the figure above demonstrate the differences between *Stardoll* and other spaces online that are articulated by the girls. The author of the first quotation makes a distinction between *Stardoll*, as a children's website and 'Skype' or 'Oovoo' as adult spaces online. Marking the boundaries of *Stardoll* is demonstrated in the third quote where the dating website advert is 'completely inappropriate' because *Stardoll* is a 'site for kids'. The girls consider the use of *Stardoll* as a dating site as problematic because it blurs the boundaries of a tween site because online dating is adult behaviour. The girls' understanding of *Stardoll* as a tween 'safe haven' is troubled by their perception of adults misusing the space. The fear with members potentially using *Stardoll* as a dating site is based on understandings of childhood and tweendom as asexual. The girls' troubling of tween space is evident in the second quote in the figure above where the author argues that *Stardoll* is a 'fashion site not a dam internet kids dating site!!' The girls' concerns for contact risks come from established notions of 'stranger danger' discussed in Part 1 of this chapter, but they are also for the asexual boundaries of tween girlhood being undone by children themselves.

#### 8.3.2.4. *Negotiating risk on Stardoll*

'And lastly, about Stardoll Playboy it may be sick and demeaning to women, however, it is not going to be reported by us because *the models have given their permission to appear nude in Playboy*' (original emphasis).

Figure 8-14 Quotation from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

In the discussion so far I have identified three categories of risk the girls report on the blog. I now turn to examine an example from the blog where the girls' negotiated the nature of risk on *Stardoll*.

The quotation in Figure 8-14 is from an article reporting on a number of complaints sent to the blog about 'Stardoll Playboy', a blog created by *Stardoll* members where they post images of *Stardoll* avatars modelling often naked or wearing little clothing<sup>10</sup>. The content of 'Stardoll Playboy' is not the focus of my discussion, instead I examine how the girls' define particular behaviours as risky and problematic.

While the author agrees with the complaints raised that 'Stardoll Playboy' is 'sick and demeaning to women' she argues that the blog will not report it as problematic

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<sup>10</sup> The blog is no longer active.

because the members have given their consent. The justification for not reporting 'Stardoll Playboy' recognises members' agency. This marks a distinction between other forms of problematic behaviour on *Stardoll* such as; scamming, content and potential contact risks, which I have discussed so far, as members have chosen to participate in 'Stardoll Playboy'. Potential agency within the girls' concerns for *Stardoll* being used as a dating site is overwritten by anxiety for younger, vulnerable girls. Their assumed passivity in the situation limits any recognition of agency and justifies the blog's regulatory role.

#### ***8.3.2.5. Conclusion: Understanding risk on The Ugly Side of Stardoll***

I have discussed how the blog posts on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* identify three areas of online risk for (other) *Stardoll* members: privacy, content and contact. The focus on privacy risks on the blog reflects the girls' experiences of scammers and hackers on *Stardoll*. Reflecting *Stardoll's* concern for contact risks online the girls' anxieties were amplified when reporting on potential contact risks in comparison to other forms of risk. Across categories of risk the girls' articulations had two similarities, the image of *Stardoll* as a 'safe haven' and concern for younger members.

The girls' concerns for content and contact risks coming onto the site from elsewhere reflects the boundaries that *Stardoll* themselves draw in their articulation of the website as a 'safe haven'. Throughout their negotiations of a range of risks the girls draw on the notion of *Stardoll* as a 'safe haven' highlighting

the dissonance between *Stardoll's* assertions of the site as a safe space and their experiences. Their concern for the erosion of *Stardoll's* tween space is amplified when they discuss sexual knowledge and potential contact risks. Their heightened anxiety in reporting these risk situations reflects Romantic values of childhood, which constructs children as (sexually) innocent and vulnerable.

Throughout each of the categories of risk discussed on the blog the girls focus their concerns on younger girls. In evoking notions of younger children as vulnerable and naïve their concerns are justified and their demands for increasing regulation on the site, which I discuss later in this chapter, are strengthened. By imagining a younger audience to focus their concerns on the girls distance themselves from risk on *Stardoll* and in their understanding of risk they police the boundaries of what other girls should know.

### **8.3.3. Risk management on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll***

Having outlined and investigated the girls' negotiations of risk I turn to explore their understandings of risk management. My discussion of the girls' understandings and negotiations of risk management begins with an exploration of the girls' questioning *Stardoll's* approaches to safety. I look at the girls' concerns over their perception of the lack of regulation on the site and their critiques of *Stardoll's* safety campaigns. I go on to examine the girls' discourses of risk management that are produced on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. I analyse in what ways their information reflects the safety discourses on *Stardoll* and to what extent it differs. As part of

this I interrogate a number of community developed 'safety mechanisms' that rely on peer-to-peer knowledge networks as alternative ways of risk management developed by the girls on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*.

#### **8.3.3.1. Risk management: discrediting *Stardoll's* safety advice**

In Part 1 of this chapter I outlined and analysed *Stardoll's* discourses of risk and safety. Drawing on this context I now discuss the girls' responses to *Stardoll's* approaches to safety on the blog. The girls' criticisms of *Stardoll* focus on two different aspects of safety discourses on the site. First the majority of the girls' criticisms of *Stardoll* are based on their perceptions of a lack of regulatory activity on the site. Second the girls critique *Stardoll's* safety campaigns that aim to raise awareness of online safety.

'At least they are being caught so I can warn ya all 2 stay away but still it should be stardoll doing this!'

'Also tut tut sd (*Stardoll*) letting her get away with writing that!!!'

'So gals it looks like we are on our own!!!!!!'

Figure 8-15 Quotations from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

'I wonder if they realise that 2 younger members a cheat means that u shouldn't do it but it will work!! Ya no like playstation cheats etc!'

Figure 8-16 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

The girls argue that *Stardoll* does not police interactions on the site resulting in increased risk for members. The examples in Figure 8-15 above highlight the girls' perception that *Stardoll* has failed to adequately monitor the site. Sentiments similar to the first and second quotes are found throughout the blog demonstrating the girls' opinion that the governance of the site is *Stardoll's* responsibility, a discourse I examine in greater depth later in this chapter. The girls suggest that *Stardoll* has a 'hands off' attitude to regulation. For example in the second quote above the author comments, 'tut tut sd (*Stardoll*) letting her get away...', suggesting that *Stardoll* have made a decision not to police 'inappropriate' language and instead let members 'get away'. The final quote in the figure above concludes the girls' evaluation of *Stardoll's* regulation, 'it looks like we are on our own', providing a justification for the blog within the *Stardoll* community.

A number of *Stardoll's* safety campaigns were subject to criticism on the blog. The extract in Figure 8-16 above was written in response to *Stardoll's* safety advice that warned members, 'Watch out! All free stardollar promises on sites other than Stardoll are **cheats!**' (original emphasis). In this example the author is critical of *Stardoll's* (perceived) lack of understanding of the tween culture the website is a part of. *Stardoll* is presented in this quote as out of touch because they do not



understand the subcultural meaning of the word 'cheat' and are therefore unable to understand real experiences on the site. In highlighting a culture divide the girls place themselves as knowledgeable and understanding of this subculture, a distinction that works to legitimate the blog's role.

**8.3.3.2. Discourses of safety on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll***



Figure 8-17 Screen shot of the banner on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll's* homepage

1. Never give out your password
2. Never give out ANY information from your account – Even the smallest thing can be used to gain access to your account
3. Never visit any site offering “free” le, dkny etc
4. Always remember if something seems to good to be true then it probably is
5. I always say follow your gut feeling, I know it sounds silly but iv had a bad feeling about someone, ignored it and got scammed a few times, you will know if it doesn't feel right & if not then don't do it!
6. If you get a crazed loony come to your page \*which im sure we have all had 100s of em) just block and report (after getting a capture 4 us of course) don't antagonize them!
7. Don't always believe everything you hear or are told, check the fact first!
8. Finally if you are unsure of anything please feel free to contact one of us anytime

Figure 8-18 Quotations from the 'Stay safe of stardoll' article on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

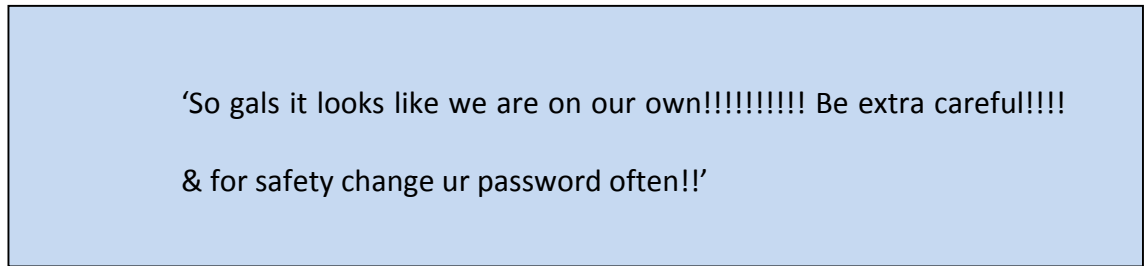


Figure 8-19 Quotation from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

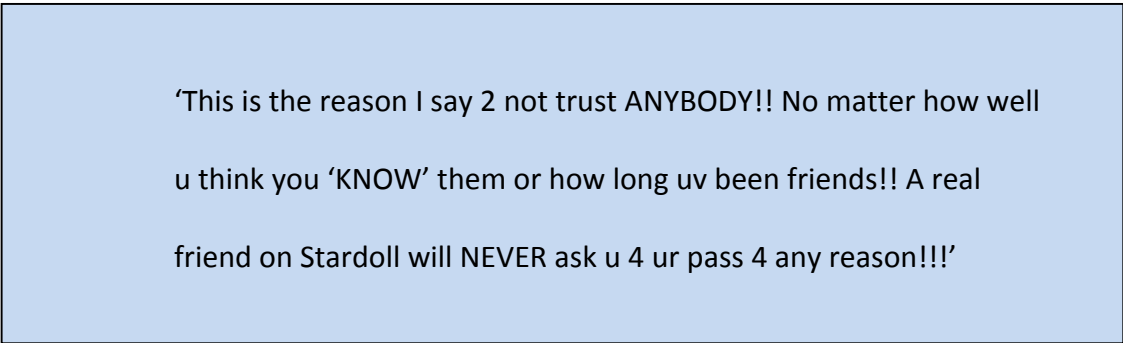
Information and advice about online safety is prominently articulated on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. For example the homepage of the blog features a safety banner, displayed in the screen shot in Figure 8-17 above. The banner scrolls through a number of safety messages such as 'never give out your SD [Stardoll] info' and 'you wouldn't do it in real life so don't do it on the web'. The placement of the safety banner on the homepage and the use of bright colours and rolling text draw the attention of the reader.

Furthermore the blog has a permanent article 'Stay safe on stardoll' for readers to refer to, shown in Figure 8-18 above. In addition the girls' safety advice is littered throughout their blog posts; sometimes in specific posts to reiterate key information and often the authors ended their posts with a reminder of previous safety advice. For example the quote in Figure 8-19 above is an extract published at the end of a post discussing scamming and hacking, which reminds readers to 'change ur password often'.

The prominence of safety advice on the blog reflects the importance the girls placed on informing other members. The advice given across the blog is for mitigating a range of risks; privacy, content and contact, that girls might encounter

on *Stardoll*. On the one hand the content of the girls' safety advice parallels *Stardoll's* own but on the other their approach to online safety differs significantly. I turn to explore these contrasting approaches to risk management on *Stardoll*.

#### 8.3.3.2.1. Risk management: repeating *Stardoll's* advice



'This is the reason I say 2 not trust ANYBODY!! No matter how well u think you 'KNOW' them or how long uv been friends!! A real friend on *Stardoll* will NEVER ask u 4 ur pass 4 any reason!!!'

Figure 8-20 Quotation from The Ugly Side of *Stardoll*

A number of aspects of *Stardoll's* safety advice, outlined in Part 1 of this chapter, overlap with the girls' approaches to risk management. For example some of the advice in the safety guide illustrated in Figure 8-20 replicates *Stardoll's* advice such as password protection, account privacy and cheats. Moreover, in their safety advice the girls advocate *Stardoll's* block and report technique, despite the fact that they don't perceive the site as effective in dealing with these reports. While the girls suggest that their readers 'block and report' in addition they ask that they send in a picture to the blog so they can report the incident.

Furthermore in these extracts similar discourses of concern and risk within the framework of digital culture are articulated in *Stardoll's* advice and some of the

information on the blog. The quotation above replicates *Stardoll's* concern with personal information and potential contact risks. As I have discussed in the previous section the girls' amplified contact concerns mirror *Stardoll's* emphasis on these risks. The author's comment that readers should 'not trust ANYBODY!! No matter how well u think you 'KNOW' them' echoes *Stardoll's* advice to girls, 'remember: people online might not be who they say they are' (2013). In mitigating potential contact risks the girls repeat *Stardoll's* advice to keep personal information hidden.

8.3.3.2.2. Risk management: the girls' mechanisms of safety

1. Name and shame

The blog's focus of 'naming and shaming' highlights individuals who are engaging in 'inappropriate' behaviour, from scamming and hacking to using *Stardoll* as a dating site.

2. Scamming lists

These lists are created and maintained by writers on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The girls also mention finding these lists by searching for membership names across the website.

3. Checking for notes

Each member on *Stardoll* can create personal sceneries, attached to the Suite. *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* promotes writing notes in old sceneries indicating that a member has scammed in the past.

4. Checking with references

Members who are considered to be 'safe' traders have a list of references for potential dealers to check with.

Figure 8-21 List of safety mechanisms on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

While some aspects of *Stardoll's* safety guidance is echoed on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, most of the advice on the blog is different because of the girls' critique of *Stardoll's* approach as ineffective. The girls' development of a series of risk management 'mechanisms' are illustrated in Figure 8-21. All of the mechanisms work through a network of peer-to-peer knowledge. Most of the mechanisms, numbers two, three and four, listed in Figure 8-21 are ways to mitigate potential scammers and hackers. I discuss the first mechanism on the list, naming and shaming, in more detail below, as it is a prolific approach on the blog. Furthermore it is significant to the girls' understandings of the role on the blog, highlighted by their tagline 'shamed, pictured and framed'.

The girls' regulatory mechanisms to manage risks on *Stardoll* create consequences for behaviours they consider 'inappropriate' on the site. As interactions on *Stardoll*, particularly swapping or selling clothing, rely on trust between members the mechanisms developed by the girls allow the community to share information. The girls' safety mechanisms highlight a distinction between the girls' use of *Stardoll* and the official, intended use of the space such as exchanging clothing or doing make overs for other avatars. The emergence of 'unofficial' ways to play on *Stardoll* require different forms of governance and the mechanisms promoted by the blog regulate these interactions. Through participating in community based mechanisms *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is able to have an effect in governing *Stardoll*. The girls' mechanisms enable them to actively police behaviour on *Stardoll* in addition to the blog operating as a space for peer surveillance.

Naming and shaming

'Now I usually only name & shame scammers but well I think this is just as bad!!!.... GIRLS U HAVE BOTH BEEN NAMED & SHAMED!!!'

'yes I no I name & shame people but well if ur guna do the crime then face up 2 the consequences instead of bitchin at me!!!'

Figure 8-22 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll



Figure 8-23 Screen shot from The Ugly Side of Stardoll



'Naming and shaming' is the most common risk management mechanism on the blog. In publishing members' names on the blog the girls hope that they will be 'shamed' into stopping and that other members of the *Stardoll* community will be made aware of individuals. The first quote in Figure 8-22 above is in response to claims that a member stole items of clothing from another *Stardoll* member. As a result of the accusation the member was featured in articles on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* naming and shaming her. When the girls 'name and shame' individual members the author of the blog post uses a screen shot of the accused's avatar, shown in Figure 8-23 above. The stylised images are part of the naming and shaming reporting practices, mirroring 'mug shots' of criminals. These screen shots are either taken by the authors or sent it by members wishing the blog to report on an incident. In most cases a stamp of approval from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* can be identified on the image, as in the image above. The use of the stamp implies that the image has been certified by the girls and validates the conviction of the *Stardoll* member. The second quote in Figure 8-22 above continues the girls' approach to problematic behaviour on *Stardoll* as a crime. In this post the author comments 'if ur guna do the crime then face up 2 the consequences' reinforcing the sense of the blog as a vigilante site as discussed in the beginning of Part 2.

Social capital and the girls' safety mechanisms

'Thank you ... for submitting this to us! We really appreciate your help; without you we couldn't run this site! Thanks to you and all other dedicated views of this blog!'

Figure 8-24 Quotation from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

As I have discussed the girls' activities to manage risk on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* operate through their peer-to-peer networks. These networks are a form of social capital, which the girls use to govern *Stardoll*. The girls' position as community moderators relies on their accumulations of social capital. In mentioning their popularity on *Stardoll* and offering themselves as key sources for other members to turn to they present themselves as at the centre of social networks and as having social capital on the site. The girls are active in creating and extending their social networks on *Stardoll* in regular promotions of the blog.

Through their activities on the blog the girls actively call on their social networks for information and in order to impose effective sanctions. The operation of the blog reflects Putnam's definition that social capital is a 'feature of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (1995:67). This is reflected in the quotation in Figure 8-24 where the author is thanking members for sending information into the blog. The girls frequently acknowledge that it is through the reciprocity of

members of their wider social network in providing information and responding to calls of action that enables the blog to function as a community site. The function of the girls' social capital enables a network of girls to have impact on *Stardoll*.

### **8.3.3.3. Managing risk on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll***

On *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the girls' criticise the absence of regulation and sanctions for inappropriate or risky behaviour on *Stardoll*. The girls have developed a range of mechanisms on the blog to manage their experiences and perceptions of risk on *Stardoll*. The community-run scammer lists, references and notes mean that in a space where there is, in the girls' perception, little or no regulation they can impose this. Not only do these mechanisms work as places of community gathered knowledge but they also create sanctions for certain types of behaviour such as scamming within 'unofficial' modes of play on the site.

The girls' mechanisms of safety result in the *Stardoll* community, and in particular, the writers of the blog, undertaking moderation labour on behalf of *Stardoll*. In their discussion of immaterial labour in digital cultural spaces Humphreys and Vered argue that 'rather than the imposition of some top down authority that forces people to 'work for free' the peer to peer norming of productive behaviours online demonstrates the ways in which user agency can simultaneously reproduce exploitative relations and produce pleasure' (2014: 11). While Humphreys and Vered discuss these practices in terms of creative output the girls' actions in moderating *Stardoll* can be considered within this framework. However the girls

frame their own unpaid and unrecognised moderation labour as a way to (re) position themselves as agentful on *Stardoll*.

The girls' management of risk through their actions on the blog highlights the potential for consumers to participate in online cultures; as Jenkins (2006) argues the Internet has enabled a 'collective intelligence'. While his discussion focuses on fandom experiences, the girls' actions through *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* amount to similar practices of knowledge sharing and staking claims for pieces of popular culture. I explore these issues in more depth later in this chapter. The girls' approaches to risk management on *Stardoll* allow them to create sites for meaningful consumer agency for themselves and the wider community.

#### **8.3.4. Regulating risk: individual/ community/ *Stardoll's* responsibility**

In Part 2 of the chapter so far I have explored the neoliberal approach the girls take on their blog focusing on risk understanding and risk management. I now turn to a third neoliberal trait discussed in Part 1, individual responsibility. I argue that discourses of responsibility are nuanced and contradictory on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, comprising notions of risk management as individual, collective and *Stardoll's* responsibility. In the following sections I examine each of these articulations of responsibility.

**8.3.4.1. *Go Girls: Enabling individual responsibility***

'don't forget most scammers will giv it away jus by talkin 2 u, asking u  
2 hurry, being angry or maybe even a little rude!'

'look around her suite is it a new account?? Is her guestbook  
closed?? If so y doesn't she want people 2 contact her?'

Figure 8-25 Quotation from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

'Great to see more n more of ya sticking up for yourselves!! GO  
GIRLS!!!'

'Yet another hacker takes on the younger & supposedly more  
gullable generation of stardoll! & I must say 2 ya YOU GO GIRL!!!'

Figure 8-26 Quotation from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

In Part 1 of this chapter I analysed how the traits of neoliberal, postfeminist subjectivities i.e. education, empowerment and choice, discussed by Gill and Scharff (2011) and Koffman and Gill (2013), are discursively constructed by *Stardoll* in their articulations of risk and safety. I draw on this framework in this section to investigate the girls' contradictory discourses of risk responsibility.

As I have mentioned *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* was established as an alternative site for safety information and advice and as such the blog is a space for informal learning. Individual responsibility for risk mitigation is articulated on the blog through the numerous pages and posts sharing safety advice. In their advice the girls educate their readers on cultivating their risk instincts, demonstrated by the quotations in Figure 8-25 above. By encouraging their readers to learn instincts the girls express risk management as an individual activity, which will be aided with these skills. Moreover, their individual approach to risk responsibility is emphasised by the authors of the posts congratulating members who followed their advice. The two quotes in Figure 8-26 are typical of their approach. Using the phrase 'go girls', which is frequently repeated in their blog posts, the girls' articulations of individual risk responsibility adopt a 'Girl Power' tone. As I examined in Chapter 2 notions of agency and choice are significant in expressions of Girl Power discourses. Through informal learning *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* empowers girls to command agency as social actors on *Stardoll*.

The mechanisms and advice developed by the girls on the blog aim to empower their readers to take personal responsibility for risk understanding and management. Their approach reflects the 'Active Girls' discourse articulated through *Stardoll's* advice to girls. Unpacking this discourse in Part 1 of this chapter I explored how *Stardoll* gives girls' tools for individual responsibility through safety advice and mechanisms such as the report button. The girls' approaches to managing risk often advocate individual responsibility, for example mirroring *Stardoll* the girls use the format of a quiz to check their readers' knowledge and

understanding of risks. In both *Stardoll's* and the blog's articulations of risk responsibility members are empowered to mitigate their own risks. The expressions of empowerment reflect the postfeminist neoliberal subjectivity discussed by Gill and Scharff (2011) and are illustrated by the 'Go Girls' discourse on the blog. In a similar way to *Stardoll* the image of the 'can do' girl (Harris, 2004) is used on the blog as a figure of achievement; readers can be part of this image of girlhood through good choices and work in relation to risk understanding, moderation and responsibility.

Therefore to some extent the girls reflect *Stardoll's* neoliberal individualised approach to girls' risk responsibility on the site. However as I discuss later in this chapter, the girls' articulations of individual responsibility are contradicted by discourses of collective responsibility on the blog and are undermined by their calls for more regulation by *Stardoll*. I now turn to explore these alternative articulations of responsibility.

**8.3.4.2. *Cultural citizenship and community responsibility***

'I am really excited to help the Stardoll community!'

'Our job here on the blog is to help people!! Simple as that! Most of the posts we put on the blog are sent from other worried Stardoll users which is the whole point!!'

'The ONLY reason we do this blog is to help YOU! So you know who to stay away from & more importantly how to stay safe!'

'I just wanted 2 apologise 4 not posting a lot lately but what with Christmas etc I haven't had time 2 do anything!'

'I can't just sit on my laptop 24/7 and fix your problems for you! Give me a few days, PLEASE!'

'maybe they have realized that im doin a better job than they ever will by actually doin everthin I can 2 help people!!!'

**Figure 8-27 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll**

While the girls promote individual responsibility on the blog they position themselves as community moderators and encourage their readers to engage in collective responsibility for risk management on *Stardoll*. Throughout the blog a sense of community responsibility is part of their articulations of risk and safety. I



draw on the concept of cultural citizenship to interrogate the girls' complex discourses of community responsibility. Hermes defines cultural citizenship as when 'we feel committed by and responsible for in relation to relevant others and to strangers' (2006: 28). This definition enables an understanding of forms of citizenship that are not based within political understandings. Framing the girls' actions through the blog with the concept of 'cultural citizenship' makes sense of the girls' actions and their calls for collective responsibility. Hermes argues that defining boundaries of acceptability, a sense of responsibility, and a desire to gain recognition as co-owners are features of cultural citizenship.

The girls' sense of community responsibility on *Stardoll* saturates the blog. The girls' motivation in establishing *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* was to provide a community service. This attitude is evident in the repeated use of the word 'help' in first three quotations in Figure 8-27 above. These extracts, taken from a number of blog posts, communicate the girls' commitment to the wider *Stardoll* community. Furthermore the next two quotations demonstrate their personal experiences of their commitment to the blog. The first author begins her blog post by apologising to the readers for not being able to write recently and the second expresses the time consuming nature of community moderating. As I have analysed throughout Part 2 of this chapter the girls' sense of responsibility for younger members is evident throughout their understanding and management of risk. In setting up the blog as a space for collective responsibility, and positioning themselves as community moderators, the girls' attitude reflects Hermes' concept of cultural citizenship within which individuals take responsibility 'to relevant others and

strangers' (2006: 28). Their attitude is reflected in the quotation in Figure 8.27 above where the author discusses her motivation in writing for the blog, 'so you know who to stay away from & more importantly how to stay safe'. The girls' sense of responsibility, particularly to younger and more vulnerable members is communicated through their encouragement for collective responsibility.

Furthermore Hermes argues that part of cultural citizenship is 'taking responsibility for (one's piece of) popular culture' (2006: 39). The articulations of collective responsibility and the development of mechanisms for risk mitigation on the blog reflect Hermes' argument. I have already discussed the peer-to-peer nature of the girls' risk management mechanisms, which rely on members engaging in a sense of collective responsibility.

On the blog the girls engage in processes of (re)defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour on *Stardoll*, which is a practice of cultural citizenship (Hermes, 2006). Moreover, their activities on the blog do not stop at defining action on *Stardoll* but actively work at regulating interactions on the site. The final aspect of cultural citizenship discussed by Hermes is the desire to gain recognition as co-owners of culture. Throughout the blog there are examples where the girls have tried to engage with *Stardoll*. In one instance the girls receive an email response reportedly from *Stardoll* staff refuting their concerns. The final extract in Figure 8-27 is taken from the article, 'Shocking!!!! What Stardoll really think!!!!' written in response to the email refuting the concerns of the blog. The author suggests that *Stardoll* have realised the blog is better at regulating the site. This

example highlights how the girls strive to have their concerns and moderation work recognised by *Stardoll*.

Through the girls' expressions of community responsibility and by developing collective risk management strategies on *Stardoll* they engage in cultural citizenship. As I have previously discussed community responsibility on the blog is achieved through the girls' networks of social capital. I now go on to explore the third discourse of responsibility on the blog, *Stardoll's* responsibility for risk understanding and risk management.

**8.3.4.3. *Stardoll's responsibility***

'All this going on & the hacking scamming weirdos pervs etc got me wondering if there was anyone actually TRYING 2 keep us Stardoll gals safe at all so after a little searching I can finally expose... STARDOLL'S SAFETY SUPERVISOR!' (This text is followed by an image of a chimpanzee).

'it makes me sick 2 think of all the decent people who got their stuff the honest way have something like this happen n surprise sur-feckin –prise stardoll r doing SHITE ALL!!!! GET OFF UR BACKSIDES & SHUT THESE SITES & ACCOUNTS DOWN.. FOR GOOD!!!'

'Stardoll NEED to come up with some kind of sensoring 4 the younger sd generation! Me...im used 2 seeing stuff like this on ere but a girl that age... does not need 2 see stuff like this!! Come on Stardoll do SOMETHING!!!!'

'At least they are being caught so I can warn ya all 2 stay away but still it should be stardoll doing this!'

'This is yet another loony that Stardoll is allowing on their 'well protected & safe' site!! ... people like this need removing from Stardoll 4 good!!!!!!'

Figure 8-28 Quotations from The Ugly Side of Stardoll

Having explored how the girls established the blog so that it enables individual and collective risk responsibility I analyse the girls' final articulation of risk responsibility, their arguments that *Stardoll* should take responsibility.

As I discussed in the beginning of Part 2 the girls established the blog because of their concerns for the lack of regulation on *Stardoll*. Their frustration with *Stardoll* is evident in the quotes in the figure above. This is communicated clearly in the first quotation from a blog post detailing concerns for a new scam on the site where the author suggests that *Stardoll's* safety supervisor is as useless as a chimpanzee in keeping members safe on the site. The girls' anxieties over the lack of moderation on *Stardoll* are articulated with a sense of urgency and amplified through their use of exclamation marks and capital letters.

Throughout the blog the girls suggest that *Stardoll* is able to regulate the site but chooses not to do so. The author in the second quotation above states 'get off your backsides & shut these sites and accounts down', another implores *Stardoll* to 'do something' and in the final quote the author suggests that there is another 'loony that *Stardoll* is allowing on their 'well protected & safe site!!' In each of these examples the girls suggest that *Stardoll* is not fulfilling their role in maintaining the site as a 'safe haven' out of choice. The girls' understandings of *Stardoll's* risk responsibility is communicated clearly in the fourth quote above, where the author argues that the blog is undertaking moderation work on the site but 'it should be *Stardoll* doing this'. Furthermore the girls' sense of *Stardoll's* responsibility is

amplified because of the site's tween status, evidenced in the final quote, which references *Stardoll's* claims to be a protected and safe site.

As I have discussed in the previous sections the girls' aim to teach members to take individual risk responsibility and, through the blog, to participate in collective risk responsibility and management. The girls' complex articulations of risk responsibility contradict *Stardoll's* discourses of parental responsibility, which I analysed in Part 1 of this chapter. Ultimately, however the girls see *Stardoll* as responsible for governing the site and their articulations and mechanisms for individual and collective risk responsibility are in response to their perceptions of *Stardoll's* lack of responsibility. Despite their criticisms of *Stardoll's* strategies for risk understanding and risk management as well as their lack of risk responsibility the girls argue that the site should ensure its tween status is maintained.

### 8.3.5. Negotiating risk on Stardoll and The Ugly Side of Stardoll

In this section I draw together my analysis of *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. I begin exploring questions of agency, interrogating the neoliberal perspective replicated by the girls on their blog. I discuss how the neoliberal attitudes demonstrated by the girls are incompatible with their understandings of girlhood.

#### 8.3.5.1. *Understandings and experiences of risk agency on Stardoll and The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

'great Stardoll FINALLY want our opinion on whats goes on, on Stardoll! But OHHH NOOOOOO instead it is a survey about BOOKS!!! Like we really care about books! We are more bothered with the hackers, scammers & sickos ripping us of & creeping us out!!!'

Figure 8-29 Quotation from *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*

In this chapter I have examined a number of aspects of neoliberal subjectivities discussed by Shirani et al., (2012), Gill and Scharff (2011) and Scott and Jackson (1999), in particular risk understanding, risk management and individual responsibility. I have explored how these subjectivities are present in the 'Active Girls' discourse on *Stardoll*, and mirrored on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. Inherent within these aspects of a neoliberal subjectivity are understandings of agency to

manage risk. The girls' agency is constructed by *Stardoll* and negotiated by the girls on the blog in different ways. These competing discourses and experiences of agency on *Stardoll* which are articulated on the site and the blog provide an interesting point of discussion as Humphreys and Vered argue that 'understanding the practices around new media is critical to understanding how power operates in them and through them' (2013: 5).

As I discussed in Part 1 of this chapter *Stardoll* constructs their members as active social actors. In contrast to this the girls framed themselves as lacking agency on *Stardoll*, contradicting the 'Active Girls' discourse. In commenting on their lack of agency the girls discussed *Stardoll's* disinterest in their concerns. The quote in Figure 8-29 communicates the girls' desire to contribute on *Stardoll*, and reveals their frustrations with the site for not identifying and dealing with real concerns for members. The quote highlights how power operates in the structure of the site, as *Stardoll* decides in what ways and on what topics members can contribute. This extract exemplifies the dissonance between *Stardoll's* framework for cultural participation and the girls' experiences and perspectives on their input. Within new media landscapes, Humphreys and Vered argue, 'one of the key affordances of interactivity is increased opportunity for agency and participation' (2014: 5). In establishing *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the girls develop an alternate space for interaction between *Stardoll* members. Within this space an alternative discourse of risk can be articulated. The girls reject the framework of agency offered by *Stardoll* as ineffective and instead through their actions on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* hope to create meaningful agency within and for their community.



As I have argued, the girls' activities on the blog reflect the neoliberal attributes that I have discussed in this chapter. They promote individual responsibility and take collective responsibility for risk, establish the blog as a space for peer learning and develop ways of mitigating risk. It could be argued that the girls demonstrate neoliberal agency through their activities on the blog, which has been enabled through new media ecologies giving rise to new opportunities for cultural participation. The girls' actions could be framed as Harris' (2004) 'can do' girlhood, as the girls have created a DIY space to undertake risk moderation on *Stardoll*. However whilst the girls' actions could be framed as exemplifying their neoliberal agency this is contrasted with their demands for more regulation on *Stardoll* to be undertaken by the site.

#### **8.3.5.2. Neoliberal subjects?**

Within 'risk society' parents are given responsibility for the management of children's risk (Jackson and Scott, 1999). The discursive construction of responsibility on *Stardoll* replicates this as I discussed in Part 1 of the chapter where parents are given risk responsibility for their children. However in Part 2 I explored three discourses of responsibility articulated on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, individual, collective and *Stardoll's* risk responsibility. I argued that the girls' perceived individual and collective responsibility is a reaction to the lack of responsibility taken by *Stardoll* who should be regulating the space. Throughout their blog the girls want *Stardoll* to act as parental figures on the site and take responsibility for

protecting the children who use the site. Their demands for *Stardoll* to take responsibility for members occurs because within online spaces the parental figure is missing. Therefore the girls occupy a contradictory space where on the one hand they enact neoliberal notions of risk understanding, management and responsibility, however on the other they campaign for regulation undertaken by *Stardoll*. This inconsistency arises from their understandings of childhood that are at odds with a neoliberal subjectivity.

As discussed in Chapter 2, within contemporary notions of childhood children are not given the ability to self-regulate because they are innocent, vulnerable and therefore in need of protection (Meyer, 2007). Jackson and Scott (1999) argue that this construction results in parents being given responsibility to protect their children. The girls draw on the same Romantic understandings of children, which are amplified by their notions of a passive audience to justify their calls for *Stardoll* to take risk responsibility for the protection of their members in the absence of parents online. The girls' risk anxiety and understandings of *Stardoll* as an explicitly tween site inform the intensity of peer surveillance as they were concerned for young girls as I have examined throughout Part 2. By framing other members of *Stardoll* as vulnerable and at risk the regulatory role of the blog was justified.

#### **8.3.5.3. Risk anxiety and digital girlhood**

The prominence of discourses of risk on *Stardoll* and the girls' decisions to create and maintain *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* demonstrate a heightened sense of risk

anxiety in online spaces. In a similar way to Jackson and Scott's argument that, 'risk anxiety helps construct childhood and maintains its boundaries' (1999: 86), *Stardoll's* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll's* discourses of risk construct the site as a tween space. In Part 1 I argued that *Stardoll* constructs tween age boundaries around its digital space and that discourses of risk govern this separation. In Part 2 I examined how the girls' risk anxiety focused on the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and content for *Stardoll* as a tween site.

The discursive construction of risk on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is formulated within broader understandings of risk society. These notions of risk are articulated in particular ways because of the gendered, aged and digital nature of *Stardoll*. In Part 1 and Part 2 of this chapter I have argued that *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* amplified anxiety for contact risks and in each case these concerns were for 'stranger danger'. Mirroring Scott and Jackson's (1999) argument the impact of the stranger danger message for girls is concern for sexual risk. Reinforcing Pedersen's (2013) discussions of gendered risk I have examined how the assumed gendered and aged audience of the site as tween informed risk anxiety on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*.

However, in addition to constructing the boundaries of tween girlhood the girls' risk anxiety actively polices contemporary tween girlhood as I have explored throughout Part 2 of this chapter. The girls' concerns for risk on *Stardoll* articulate a broader anxiety than for individual girls who might be 'at risk', they are also anxious that *Stardoll's* position as a tween space online is at risk from being eroded. The girls' actions to protect other girls who use *Stardoll* and reinstate boundaries of

## Chapter 8 – *Stardoll's* 'Safe Haven': Negotiating Risk Understanding, Management and Responsibility

age appropriate behaviour on the site reflect Jackson and Scott's argument that 'the social world of children is divided into safe and dangerous places' (1999: 101).

As I have discussed throughout Part 2 of this chapter the girls undertake significant moderation and educational labour to maintain *Stardoll* as a safe space, for themselves and significantly for other younger girls.

## 8.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at two sites where discourses of online risk are produced and negotiated. I have argued that the articulation of risk on *Stardoll* fit within neoliberal notions of parenthood and childhood, which distance the site from risk responsibility. I investigated *Stardoll's* Active Girls discourse, arguing that it articulated neoliberal values reflective of Harris' (2004) 'can do' girls. I discussed how the girls' actions on the blog mirrored the neoliberal discourse of risk understanding, management and responsibility. However I went on to argue that the girls' actions were structured by their reaction to the neoliberal framework on *Stardoll*. Instead they argued for increased regulation on *Stardoll* and for this moderation work to be undertaken by the site because of the tween nature of the site, and the (younger) age of members who are 'at risk' and vulnerable online.

Extending my discussion in Chapter 2 of the separation of childhood and adulthood within Romantic discourses of childhood I have examined the construction and maintenance of these boundaries within digital spaces. In Part 1 of this chapter I analysed how within *Stardoll's* construction of the site as an explicitly tween space discourses of risk and safety were significant in shaping boundaries of the cultural space. In Part 2 I went on to examine how the girls articulated similar boundaries of tween girlhood which were based on Romantic notions of childhood as vulnerable, understandings of younger girls as a passive audience and as maintaining tween girlhood as an asexual state.

In both parts of the chapter I analysed concerns with the porous nature of digital boundaries, a theme reflected in my discussion of tween speech genres in Chapter 7. However in this chapter I discussed how age inappropriate content or adult behaviour threatened the boundaries of tween girlhood as they can 'leak' into children's spaces online. In Part 1 and 2 I discussed how potential contact risks heightened risk anxiety and sexual knowledge as a content risk was framed as problematic on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The sense of heightened risk anxiety over these potential risks was amplified because *Stardoll* is a gendered space and their concerns for sexual content or contact risks uncover underlying anxieties for precocious sexuality. The risk anxiety on the site and the blog, and the construction and policing of boundaries of *Stardoll* as a tween space, expresses concern that the lack of online borders threatens tween girlhood.

As I set out in Chapters 2 and 3 childhood has been discussed as 'at risk' or 'in crisis' and these claims have been amplified with the emergence of digital technologies. However there has been little research exploring children's own understandings and self organized actions to manage risk online for themselves and other children. In this chapter I have analysed girls' actions on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* in examining their perceptions and experiences of risk in relation to *Stardoll's*. I argued that digital culture has given girls new opportunities for cultural consumption through peer interaction. In establishing *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the girls were able to articulate an alternative discourse of risk to *Stardoll's* 'safe haven'. This reflects Humphery and Vered's (2014) argument that new media ecologies have developed opportunities for agency. The girls' agency in cultural

consumption reflects Jenkin's study (2006) examining children's digital fandom. In both cases the digital media landscape presented new ways of global cultural consumption. *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* is demonstrative of the opportunities for girls' agency online and how these spaces can become sites for empowering other girls.

## Chapter 9. Conclusions

### Summary of main arguments

In Chapter 6 I deconstructed *Stardoll* and interrogated the articulation of tween femininity on the site. I argued that *Stardoll* signifies the website as an explicitly tween cultural space, through drawing on conventions of girlhood, the pinkification of the site and the use of tween consumer culture. I went on to argue that girls are positioned within a Girl Power discourse and located as postfeminist and neoliberal subjectivities on the site through three aspects of *Stardoll's* tween girlhood. First, *Stardoll's* consumer culture is a site for girls' tween identity play, where experimenting with identities is framed as a leisure activity. I argued that doll play has been reconstituted as a site for girls' postfeminist identity play on *Stardoll*. The second aspect of *Stardoll's* tween girlhood is the participatory celebrity culture on offer on the site, where girls themselves, can become celebrities through the 'celebritisation' of the tween self. Celebrity status on *Stardoll* is denoted through financial capital, which enables girls to purchase items and access functions like hosting parties. The demonstration of an empowered celebrity positioning through the ability to make purchases, and the emphasis on self-management in gaining celebrity status on the site, reinforces girls' location as postfeminist subjectivities on *Stardoll*. Third, I argued that *Stardoll's* tween girlhood is positioned within a 'can do', entrepreneurial discourse, within which girls are presented with the opportunity to take advantage of education and career features on the site. I argued that significant barriers to girls' participation in these aspects of the site and



to achieving this girlhood are masked by discourses of choice, empowerment and meritocracy.

In Chapter 7 I shifted the focus of the discussion to analyse the production of Cyrus as a 'tween appropriate' celebrity through *Stardoll's* celebrity gossip blog the *Starblog*. I argued that the 'official' and alternatively authored discursive representations of Cyrus celebrity are articulated within a 'tween speech' genre. I analysed three distinct periods of representation on the *Starblog*, moving from Cyrus as a Disney tween star, through a quiet period where the frequency of articles rapidly decreases, to a re-emergence of Cyrus on the blog framed within a romantic discourse as Liam Hemsworth's girlfriend and fiancée. The *Starblog* moderated their representations of Cyrus' celebrity persona to be 'tween appropriate' in light of her increasingly sexualised persona that transgresses the asexual nature of tween girlhood. In the first period Cyrus is positioned as a tween within a Disney childhood. The second period sees a decrease in articles because Cyrus' increasing public sexualised persona becomes difficult to reconcile with *Stardoll's* tween speech genre. Third Cyrus' sexuality is discursively brought under control and rendered 'tween appropriate' by framing her within a romantic discourse of femininity.

However, in the girls' comment threads Cyrus' sexuality explicitly functions as a structure for their representations and fandom trajectories. Furthermore, I argued that through the girls' practices of slut shaming they distance middle class tween girlhood from Cyrus' threatening sexuality. I examined how both the 'official' *Starblog* representation and the girls' alternatively authored Cyrus are invested in

similar notions of 'wholesome' tween girlhood and of Cyrus as a role model, which frame her increasingly sexualised celebrity persona as a transgression of these boundaries. However, I argued that this is achieved through distinctly different speech conventions, as where Cyrus' sexualised transgressions were met with silence on the *Starblog*, in the girls' comment threads her sexualised persona is governed through the their explicit slut shaming practices.

In Chapter 8 I analysed articulations of risk on *Stardoll* and the blog *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*, run by a number of *Stardoll* members, and examined risk understanding, management and responsibility on each site. I argued that *Stardoll* constructs the website as a 'safe haven' for tweens, distinct from other 'risky' adolescent spaces online. The tween nature of the space was reinforced by the gendered and aged discourses of risk, which focus on contact risks. The site distances itself from risk responsibility and through the guidance given to parents, positions responsibility as part of 'good' parenting online. However, in their articulation of risk *Stardoll* situate the girls who use the site within an Active Girls discourse, where they have responsibility for understanding and managing their own risk online, as digital natives who innately understand the ethics of online interaction. I argued that these contradictory positions could be reconciled within Romantic discourses of childhood, where girls on the one hand have an innate sense of ethics and morality, whilst on the other are vulnerable and at risk, and therefore in need of their parents' protection.

*The Ugly Side of Stardoll* presents an alternative discourse of risk, articulated by a group of *Stardoll* members. Through their blog posts they discuss a broader range

of risks to *Stardoll*, including privacy risks where their concern for scamming and hacking on the site is apparent. Similarly to *Stardoll* the girls also emphasised contact risks through their heightened risk anxiety around potential paedophilia and the use of *Stardoll* as a dating site. In response to their criticisms of *Stardoll's* risk management they girls developed their own community-based mechanisms that enable the blog to govern 'unofficial' modes of play on the site. I argued that the girls articulate three contradictory discourses of risk responsibility. First, they empower other girls to take individual responsibility for risk through giving advice and testing their knowledge, in similar ways to *Stardoll's* neoliberal 'Active Girls' discourse. Second, they advocate a collective approach to risk responsibility, which I argued was part of a cultural citizenship. Third, the girls demand that *Stardoll* should take responsibility for managing risk on the website. I argued that the blog could be considered a demonstration of the girls' postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivities, where they have developed alternative mechanisms for governing risk and a site for informal learning. However as the girls consistently communicate risk anxiety for other, younger girls, and demand *Stardoll* take responsibility for risk on the site, I argued that they position tween girlhood within a Romantic discourse of childhood where girls are a passive, vulnerable and uncritical audience.

### **Reconsidering research questions**

In the introduction to this thesis I outlined four sets of research questions, I now turn to reconsider these in light of the discussion in the analytical chapters.

1. How is tween girlhood constructed and signified in online spaces? What articulations of tween femininity are uttered in this space?
2. How are competing discourses of tween celebrity commanded on *Stardoll*? In what ways does this constitute different articulations of 'tween speech'?
3. In what ways is tween identity negotiated through discourses of online risk? How are the boundaries of tween culture governed by the site and by the girls?
4. How are girls positioned as social actors by discourses of girlhood on *Stardoll*? In what ways do they reposition themselves?

I addressed the first set of questions primarily in Chapter 6 where I analysed the construction of *Stardoll* as an explicitly tween cultural space. I argued that this is achieved through *Stardoll's* use of established discourses of gendered play centred around doll play, and the digitalisation of girls' bedroom culture where girls' suites on the site operated as their own personalised bedrooms. The digitalisation of girlhood culture on *Stardoll* is further reinforced by the replication of magazine culture as a site for learning how 'to do' tween girlhood. Moreover, I argued that the pinkification of *Stardoll* signifies that the website is situated within a

contemporary tween positioning. I also explored how *Stardoll's* use of tween consumer culture works to define the space as tween in two ways, first as markers of tweendom and second as the play on offer on *Stardoll* is consumer based play, reflecting Harris' (2005) and Coulter's (2005) definitions. The effect of the myriad of advertising and advergaming on *Stardoll* results in girls' play on the site being situated within a branded tween universe.

I continued to analyse how *Stardoll* constructs the site as part of tween culture through my discussions of *Stardoll's* *Starblog* in Chapter 7 and discourses of risk in Chapter 8. In Chapter 7 I focused on how *Stardoll* constructs a tween cultural space through a distinctive 'tween speech genre' where values of tween girlhood, particularly as an asexual period, shape the official discursive representation of Cyrus. Furthermore, in Chapter 8 I argued that *Stardoll's* discourses of risk position the site as a gendered and aged 'safe haven' for tween girls. I argued that *Stardoll* creates boundaries between the site as a safe space for tween girls and other (adolescent) risky spaces online. Throughout the analytical discussions in this thesis I have shown that significations of a distinctly tween culture, as young and girly, on *Stardoll* are reinforced throughout the site.

I went on to interrogate *Stardoll's* articulation of tween girlhood. In Chapter 6 I argued that the articulation of tween girlhood on *Stardoll* had three components. First, the location of *Stardoll's* virtual consumer culture as a site for tween identity play. Second, the 'celebritisation' of the tween self and the participatory celebrity culture on offer through play on *Stardoll*. Third, the position of girls as 'can do' through education and career opportunities. *Stardoll's* articulation of tween

girlhood through the design of the site and activities available locate girls as postfeminist, neoliberal subjects who are self-managing, future oriented and empowered through their participation in consumer culture. I argued that *Stardoll* constructs tween girlhood within a Girl Power discourse where the power afforded to girls is consumer based and barriers to their participation are ignored. I extended this discussion in Chapter 7 and argued that *Stardoll's* 'tween appropriate' articulation of Cyrus' celebrity was first based on notions of asexual 'wholesomeness' and later within a romantic discourse, as her sexuality transgressed *Stardoll's* formulations of a tween girlhood. Furthermore, in Chapter 8 I argued that girls are positioned as responsible for their own risk awareness and risk management on *Stardoll*, further reinforcing the neoliberal girlhood on the site. Throughout the discussions in this thesis I have demonstrated how *Stardoll's* articulation of tween girlhood is formulated through a postfeminist and neoliberal location.

I went on to examine the second set of questions in Chapter 7 where I investigated the articulation of Cyrus' tween celebrity through two spaces, the 'official' representation of Cyrus through the *Starblog* articles and the alternatively authored Cyrus in the girls' comment threads. I argued that Cyrus' celebrity is rendered 'tween appropriate' in the representations of her through the *Starblog* articles during three distinctive periods of reporting. I examined how the site was able to command 'tween appropriate' representations of Cyrus because of their discursive power. I went on to examine the girls' comment spaces and argued that their alternative representations of Cyrus' celebrity are explicitly commanded by

moralising discourses of 'tween appropriateness' and governed by slut shaming practices.

In response to the final question in the second set of questions I discussed how these different articulations of Cyrus' celebrity constituted similar 'tween speech' genres based on values of 'wholesomeness', with different speech conventions. I explored how Cyrus' sexuality is problematic within the 'official' and counter discursive representations of her celebrity. I argued that the *Starblog* moderates Cyrus' sexuality to conform to 'tween appropriate' values, however Cyrus' sexuality is governed explicitly in the comment threads through the girls' practices of slut shaming, despite their use of language contradicting tween values. I argued that despite their different discursive approaches to governing Cyrus' celebrity both sets of representations are formulated by similar investments in values of wholesome 'tween appropriateness' and of Cyrus as a role model to tween girls.

In Chapter 8 I discussed the third set of questions in my exploration of risk on *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. I examined how notions of tween girlhood govern *Stardoll's* and the girls' understandings of risk and safety. I argued that on *Stardoll* girls are positioned inconsistently in relation to discourses of risk, as through the 'Active Girls' discourse girls are part of a neoliberal girlhood that locates responsibility for risk understanding and management on the site on them. However girls are also positioned as vulnerable and in need of (their parents') protection, who are given risk responsibility as part of 'good' discourses of parenting.

I discussed how the girls on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* justify their approach to risk on *Stardoll* through using notions of an imagined tween audience. I argued that the girls' heightened sense of risk anxiety is gendered, and that this structured the community mechanisms they developed for managing risk. Through discourses of risk understanding, management and responsibility produced on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* the girls position (other) girls as vulnerable and 'at risk' drawing on a Romantic discourse of childhood. However despite the girls' blog operating as a space for peer to peer learning about online risk and safety, and as a site for the development for community mechanisms to manage risk on *Stardoll*, the girls argue for *Stardoll* to undertake moderation work because of the tween nature of the site. Therefore I argued that whilst the girls are positioned as neoliberal social actors by *Stardoll's* discourses of risk as part of their construction of tween culture, the girls rejected this positioning (for other girls).

I argued that the boundaries of *Stardoll's* tween culture are governed through discourses of risk produced by the site, and by the girls on their blog. Despite *Stardoll* asserting the boundaries of its 'safe haven', parents are given responsibility for managing their children's risk online and the potential for children to be risks to the space. In the second part of Chapter 8 I argued that the girls developed a number of peer-to-peer community based mechanisms and the naming and shaming practices on the blog as ways of managing risk on *Stardoll* in lieu of moderation on the site. These mechanisms worked to govern *Stardoll* as a safe tween space online.



Finally I explored the fourth set of questions throughout the analytical chapters presented in this thesis. During this thesis I have argued that the articulation of tween girlhood on *Stardoll* positions girls as postfeminist and neoliberal social actors. I began this discussion in Chapter 6, where I examined *Stardoll's* articulation of tween girlhood which positions girls as active social actors and their play on the site is framed as an identity project. I argued that these activities privilege individualism, self-management and were framed by discourses of choice, reflecting the convergence of postfeminism and neoliberalism (Gill and Scharff, 2011). I continued this discussion in Chapter 8 in my analysis of risk. Here, I argued that girls are positioned as active social agents in *Stardoll's* discourses of risk responsibility and management and that this reflects the emphasis on risk within neoliberalism (Shirani et al, 2012) and postfeminism (Harris, 2004). However I argued that this positioning within the Active Girls discourse is contradictory because their parents were given responsibility for their children's risk management. I argued that these contradictory positioning of girls in relation to online risk are underscored by Romantic notions of childhood.

I went on to address the final question in the fourth set of research questions in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. Through my analysis of two different data sets, comments on the *Starblog*, and discourses of risk produced on *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* I argued that girls position other (younger) girls as distinctly tween drawing on a Romantic conception of childhood rather than as neoliberal, postfeminist social actors as *Stardoll* situates them. This is demonstrated in Chapter 7 where I examined how Cyrus' celebrity is seen as inappropriate for (other) tween girls

because her sexuality erodes the boundaries of asexual tween girlhood. The discussion of risk in Chapter 8 further reinforces this, as I demonstrated how the girls reject the neoliberal approach to risk management set out by *Stardoll* and instead they argue for the site to actively manage risk because of the tween age of the users. In both of these examples the girls' governance of tween culture is enacted through notions of Romantic childhood where other girls are posited as vulnerable and 'at risk' from inappropriate culture. While girls are positioned as postfeminist, neoliberal social actors by *Stardoll* and to some extent could be considered to have demonstrated this sensibility in Chapter 8; the girls themselves govern the tween cultural space by reasserting Romantic notions of childhood where other girls are assumed to be a passive, vulnerable audience who are 'at risk'. The main arguments of this thesis can broadly be drawn together to discuss the way that tween cultural boundaries are constructed, negotiated and governed online.

### Methodological approach

In order to research digital tween girlhoods I combined a cultural analysis approach to researching websites with ethnographic traditions such as 'immersion' and 'mapping' in the examination of *Stardoll* and *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. Taking this approach enabled the discursive and semiotic elements of web spaces to be analysed alongside the interactivity of digital cultures. During the first, immersive, stage of this research I 'mapped' the websites and kept observation notes. This approach eased a central challenge in undertaking online research, which is the

inherently changing nature of virtual spaces. By using a combination of cultural analysis and ethnographic traditions I could trace how the site changed over the relatively long period of study, three years, and be able to discuss overarching themes that ran across the site and throughout the time period.

Approaching the research for this project in two stages, first a period of immersion, followed by a more systematic data collection on each website, meant that I had an overview of the site and its functions before deciding on specific areas to focus a more in-depth analysis on. This meant that the decision on where to undertake a more focused analysis was based on informed knowledge of the operations and functions of the sites. Identifying particular areas on *Stardoll* to focus parts of the analysis on enabled an in depth qualitative examination of the discursive and semiotic contours of tween girlhood, which would not be possible over the whole site. The research design of the project allowed for a cultural analysis of the websites as complex spaces, as well as a detailed understanding of more focused features or areas.

### **Contributions to knowledge**

This thesis makes a series of intellectual contributions to a range of fields; digital girlhood studies, childhood studies, feminist theory, celebrity and fandom literature and digital methodologies. The main contributions to these fields are as follows.

### Girlhood studies

This thesis makes a significant contribution to the emerging field of digital girlhood studies and literature examining tween culture. The combination of three interlinking case studies, commercial tween website *Stardoll*, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll* a blog established by *Stardoll* members, and the focus on tween celebrity Cyrus in Chapter 7, enabled a multi field approach to the study of girlhoods online. In the analysis presented in this thesis I have expanded contemporary academic discussions of tween girlhood by deconstructing the creation and governance of tween cultural spaces online. Furthermore, the analysis in this thesis offers an understanding of the complex situating of tween girlhood, where girls are located within both a postfeminist and neoliberal terrain and within a Romantic discourse of childhood. I have shown how the boundaries of tween identity are shaped around age and sexuality or sexual knowledge, despite their different focus points similar concerns for the boundaries of tween girlhood centred on notions of 'age appropriateness' and of 'wholesomeness' emerge in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 in the governance of these boundaries.

The work examining the main case study, *Stardoll*, combines an analysis of the commercial construction of tween culture with an understanding of how tween girls themselves govern the boundaries of tween girlhood through a focus on their comments on the *Starblog* and the girls' blog, *The Ugly Side of Stardoll*. The focus on girls' governance of tween spaces contributes a new perspective to explorations of tween culture and digital girlhood studies.

As I discussed in the overview of girlhood studies the analysis of girls' celebrity consumption and fandom practices online have been largely absent from research exploring digital girlhood. Therefore the work in this thesis on the 'celebritisation' of tween identity within a participatory celebrity culture on *Stardoll* and the production and consumption of Cyrus as a tween celebrity are important contributions to digital girlhood studies.

### Childhood studies

In drawing together childhood and girlhood studies to examine tween culture this thesis presents a rich contribution to childhood studies, and in particular work on digital childhoods. Throughout this thesis I have analysed how boundaries of tween girlhood are policed drawing on a Romantic childhood discourse, where children are constructed as innocent, vulnerable and as a passive, underdeveloped audience and framed within a developmental discourse, by the girls who use *Stardoll*. In undertaking this analysis I have made an important contribution to childhood studies as this research examines how girls articulate judgements about other girls' cultural consumption through discourses of risk and evoking Romantic discourses of childhood, in their governance of tween spaces online.

Furthermore, whilst online risk has been a feature of digital childhood research, as I set out in Chapter 3, there has been little qualitative work on how websites discursively construct risk, and the ways that children themselves negotiate risk understanding, management and responsibility within online settings. Therefore this thesis makes a significant contribution to academic work interrogating the

production of risk discourses in online tween spaces. Furthermore, the work offers an analysis of the ways in which girls understand and manage risk online, for themselves and other girls within tween spaces.

### Feminist theory

The analysis presented in this thesis contributes to research exploring the convergence of postfeminism and neoliberalism. I offer an analysis of how this is framed and negotiated within the construction of *Stardoll's* tween girlhood and by tween girls themselves.

### Celebrity and fandom studies

I have made a series of contributions to the field of celebrity and fandom studies. The focus on the production and consumption of tween celebrity addresses a significant gap in academic analysis of celebrity culture. I have shown how the constitution of tween celebrity is regulated by discourses of 'tween wholesomeness' comprised of 'tween appropriate' sexuality and role model status. The analysis in this thesis presents a unique contribution as in the articulation of Cyrus as a 'tween appropriate' celebrity on *Stardoll* both adult moderated 'official' discourses and girls' alternatively authored celebrity representations formulated within the same online space have been examined. In doing this I have shown how online spaces present girls with new opportunities for engaging in practices of celebrity production alongside consumption.

### Methodological approaches

The methodological approach taken for this project contributes to new directions in researching digital cultures. I have demonstrated that combining ethnographic techniques with a cultural analysis of websites enable a rich qualitative analysis to be undertaken over time and in ever changing virtual spaces. The two-stage research design for this project contributes to emerging discussions in digital methodology exploring how to approach the qualitative study of complex websites.

### Further areas for research

Following on from the research presented in this thesis there are a number of further areas for exploration in the fields of childhood studies, digital girlhood and celebrity and fandom studies. The rhetoric of contemporary childhood and girlhood as in crisis continues to be articulated and within this framework children and young people are positioned within discourses of harm online as concerns of sexualisation, commercialisation and technologisation converge.

The need for research examining girls' digital cultures has been amplified in light of specific recent anxieties for girls' use of the Internet. These have often been focused on social networking sites particularly around concerns for cyber bullying and paedophilia. Further research investigating digital girlhoods could be situated on these sites that have been focal points for anxieties, such as Ask FM, and could deconstruct these spaces and interrogate how girls use and negotiate them. Further case study based research analysing girls' spaces online would enable a

mapping of the terrain of digital girlhood, this would be useful for situating research in a culture that is constantly evolving. Researching other digital tween spaces would help to connect aspects of online tween culture across various sites, and further analysis of 'reading paths' could be situated across websites for younger girls and adolescents. Analysis of these spaces online would extend the discussion in this thesis exploring how boundaries of age and gender are constructed, maintained and governed online.

Considering the proliferation of commercial spaces for children's play online, such as Moshi Monsters and Club Penguin, which are designed for the tween age group, further research could examine how children negotiate the barriers to their play. Extending the work done in this thesis on discourses of risk further research in the field of digital childhoods could examine understandings of commercial risk in these commercial spaces online. Following from the research I have discussed in this thesis a focus on the way that children interpret, use and negotiate these spaces would broaden work within digital childhood studies.

The data collection for this thesis was undertaken before Miley Cyrus' controversial performance with Robin Thicke at the Video Music Awards in 2014. This represented an interesting shift in Cyrus' persona, particularly in relation to race. The continuing development of her celebrity and her fans' reaction to this would continue the analysis of the 'life cycle' of tween celebrities begun in this thesis.

In this thesis I have examined how tween culture is constructed and governed on commercial tween website, *Stardoll*. In analysing this site I have interrogated the articulation of tween femininity produced by *Stardoll* and negotiated by the girls



who use the site. I argue that tween culture on *Stardoll* is positioned on a postfeminist and neoliberal terrain, and that at times the girls demonstrate this sensibility. However, the girls and to some extent *Stardoll*, draw on Romantic discourses of childhood that are based on notions of vulnerability, asexuality and a passive audience, to (re)position girls. I argue that both *Stardoll* and the girls are invested in similar values of tween girlhood and are concerned with the governance of these boundaries that reside within a complex landscape of postfeminism and discourses of Romantic childhood. Overall this thesis argues for a nuanced approach to digital girlhood studies, exploring how girls are positioned and how they may reposition themselves in virtual spaces.

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